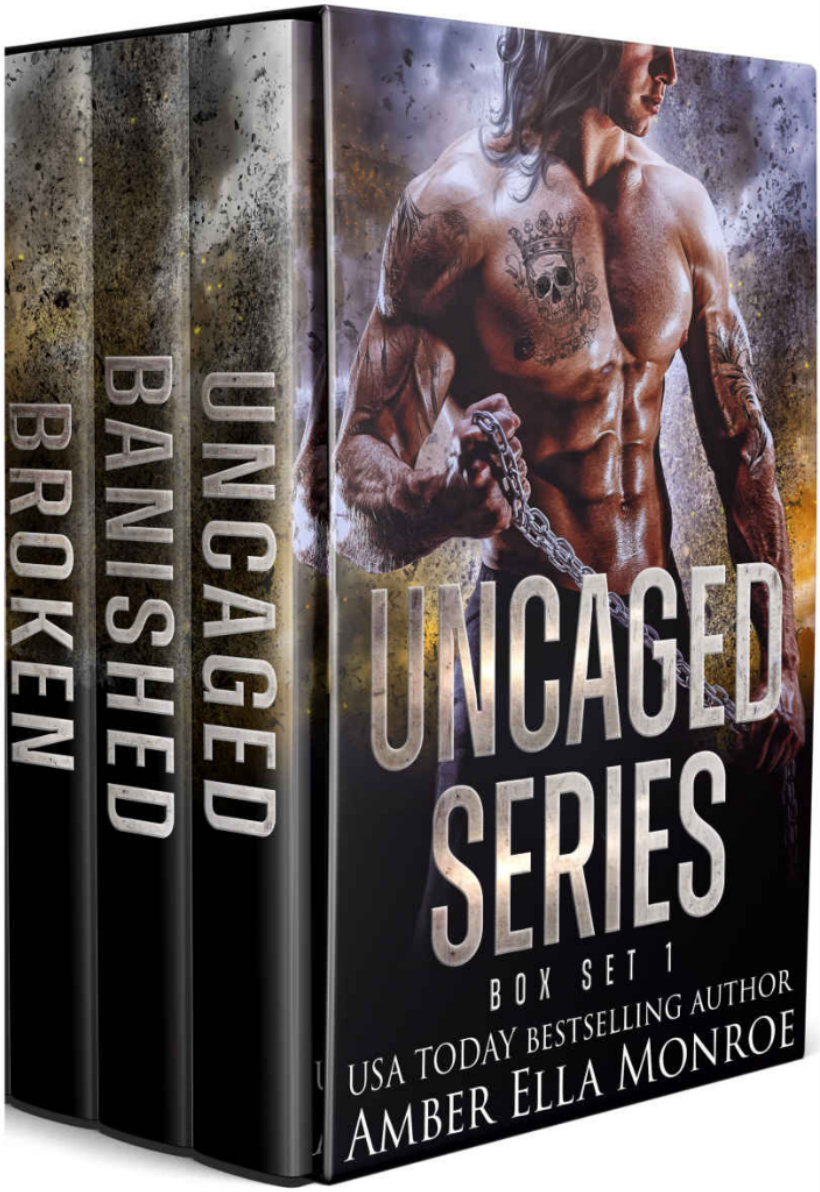

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The Uncaged Series
Box Set 1

Amber Ella Monroe

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UNCAGED

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The Uncaged 1

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Book Summary

Uncaged

Just the other day, I was bait. Now he says I am his to keep.

I was betrothed to a man I barely knew to right my mother's wrongs. That is no longer the case. The terms set forth are all null and void.

I've been kidnapped from my home by savages—beasts in man-form. We call them The Uncaged—a clan of lawless exiles and raiders known for raising hell to get what they want. When they find out what I'm worth, they'll never let me go.

The Uncaged are not men. They are Alphas. Created long ago to become super soldiers for the government, they have since turned against humanity. All who know of them stay away. No one crosses this clan. But someone did…

My Alpha captor is bold, feral, and has no time for games. He will get what he wants, even if he has to fight for it. But he's already made it clear that he's not giving me up.

I made a promise and now I can't keep it. I don't want to anymore, knowing that the only way I will know peace is with an Alpha. Human omegas are extremely rare. Once my heat surges, my Alpha won't be able to control his cravings. Our mate-bond is already forming.

He says he'll keep me safe, but there are other Alphas in the village watching… and waiting.

He won't give me back and he won't let me go. There's only one thing left to do, and the choice may ignite a war.

The Uncaged Omegaverse takes place on a dystopian Earth and combines paranormal and fantasy elements. Of course, there's a steamy, passionate romance in the mix. The story contains descriptive violence and sex and offensive language. May also include triggers. It also contains a bold, possessive alpha man and a sassy heroine.

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Preface

"A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within." Will Durant

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Prologue

Discovery brings war.
War drives sacrifice.
For every end, there is a beginning.
For every Alpha, there is an Omega.
The strong fight.
For peace. For survival.
For redemption.
In blood, there is revival.
Destiny cannot be planned.
Destiny is born.

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Chapter One

Axil

She danced like no one was watching.

But I saw her. And for a moment, I forgot why I came. Yet, she was exactly the reason I was here.

While everyone else in this area remained inside, she danced outside in the rain. She was drenched, but she didn't seem to care. She was oblivious to my arrival.

But...by the end of the night, she wouldn't be dancing anymore. I was going to take her away from here.

Her hair was long, about mid-back length and matted to her face and her body. The color was dark, maybe black or brown. I couldn't see her eyes that well, but they were a lighter color, brown or hazel.

She looked like a perfect doll with her face turned up to the sky, bathing in one of nature's gifts to man. Her feet were bare, and her ankles were slightly visible. She wore something that looked like a long thin dress. The fabric clung to her curves like a second skin, making her silhouette clearly defined.

She was a woman, no doubt. A woman that had my feet rooted to the ground, unable to separate fantasy from reality. But it was real. She was there. Alone. And utterly free for the taking.

A light breeze filtered through the rain showers, and a whiff of her scent beckoned to me. It was faint but strong, reminding me of honeysuckle that grew wild and free near the mountainside. On impulse, I licked my lips, yearning for a taste of something like that now. *Now* wasn't the time to think about eating or satisfying my cravings.

I shook my head, ridding my mind of all lustful thoughts.

The young woman lived by herself. I knew that much. Who would leave a beauty like her to fend for herself?

She seemed so trusting, oblivious to threats around her.

I felt sorry for her, and also hopeful that what I was getting ready to do would change her forever.

Her house was small, and it couldn't have been more than two bedrooms. There was only a single light on in the home, and it

came from the small window right above a kitchen. I had glanced inside earlier in the day when she wasn't there. As I thought back on it now, her scent was so strong, it had even lingered on her porch. Of course, I'd thought nothing of her smell then. *Honeysuckle.* But the lack of honeysuckle vines in this sector told me it was the woman I scented.

As if I wasn't in a bad enough position with the way I stalled the mission, my cock twitched behind my fly. By no means was I the type of Alpha to stick my dick in anything that had tits and walked, but seeing her feminine curves and registering her unique scent made me hard as fuck.

What I planned to do would change her, but I swore to fucking God I never planned to fuck her.

I'd suppressed my urges so long that if I wasn't on the mission I was on now, I'd snatch her from this perfect little world she lived in, only to fuck her and play with her until her pussy was raw from frequent use.

Crap. You're an animal. I bit my bottom lip and shook my head. But I knew it was true. Animalistic genes in my DNA. Savagery in my blood. I couldn't hide from it. I couldn't deny it.

But this was a mission. She was the enemy, not a fucking plaything.

I reached down, repositioned my cock, and vowed to put this mission before my instincts.

Suddenly, the woman stopped dancing and took cover on a back porch. After brushing her hair back from her face with her hands and slipping on some shoes, she picked up a small bottle and inspected it. After opening whatever it was, she brought it up to her nose and then abruptly held it back.

She seemed more and more interested in whatever was in that bottle, looking at the contents like some strange brew was inside. Moments later, she twisted the cap off again and took a small sip and immediately started coughing.

"Awful," I heard her mutter, but then she giggled. Surprisingly, she took another gulp, which resulted in a sour expression appearing on her face.

I hadn't realized what it was before, but now I did. The alcohol must've been strong and unbearable. Every time she took a sip, she acted as if she could hardly keep it down. Yet, she persisted. And more than six sips later, I figured she was intentionally getting

drunk.

To the left of me, Xonar shifted from foot to foot impatiently. “What are you waiting for? She’s right there. Go and snatch her.”

“Do you really think it will be that easy?” I asked.

“Keith and I have cleared the way. All the security guards on duty have been knocked out. Only a couple of them remain at the gates, but we’re not going that way, right?”

“That’s right. We never use the front door.”

“Winds are picking up. The weather is in our favor and their tracking dogs will never pick up our scents in this. It’s not their dogs I’m worried about. Wait any longer and we’ll catch hell trying to avoid the storm getting back home. Let’s do it. We don’t even have to break into her house. She’s outside. She made it easy for us.” He waved a hand in the woman’s direction. “Look!”

I clucked my tongue. “Almost too easy.”

Xonar squinted. “You think it’s a trap?”

I shook my head. “No. They don’t even know we’re here.”

“They’ll know soon. They’ll know very, very soon,” he warned, grinning.

“I’ve got her. Go tell Ketil and the others we’re heading out. We’ll meet in fifteen minutes at Oak Run, and then we go from there.”

Xonar nodded and started to turn around.

“And Xonar?”

“Yeah?” he answered gruffly.

“Stick with the plan. The others should follow it, too,” I told him.

He nodded. “I copy that. Heading out now.”

When he was gone, I focused on the woman again. It appeared that she had finished the small bottle and had already pulled out a second. My lips parted in shock. Surely this little thang couldn’t handle all that liquor.

But she persisted.

What the hell?

What was she trying to do? Get so drunk she’d pass out?

Lying in a pool of her own vomit was exactly where she was headed with the way she rested her head in her hand while she appeared to be talking to herself, all while getting drenched. She would catch pneumonia if she didn’t take cover from the rain. And if she didn’t stop turning up shot after shot of whatever liquor

concoction she had in those bottles, she'd be in a bad position.

A drunk hostage, I could manage.

A sick one? Maybe.

But a dead one? Nada.

I needed her alert and alive.

All of a sudden, she looked up as if she'd heard something. She wiped her hair from her face and looked around, peering into the darkness right in the general direction of where I knelt on the ground behind some shrubs.

Somewhere off in the distance, Xonar sent out an owl's call that only my crew and I would understand. The call was a positive note: Everyone was accounted for, and they all were heading towards the place where we'd meet up after everything was done.

The muted look on the woman's face told me she suspected something was off, but probably didn't know what to make of it.

The rain had slowed just a bit, leaving the howling winds to act as the only diversion to our plans.

I had to make my move, and I had to make it now.

She tipped the second bottle to her lips, and at that point, I was done watching her drink herself unconscious.

I stood and came out from behind the bushes. The moment I did, she froze and glanced in my direction. Her eyes widened with fear, and she dropped the bottle she was holding. It shattered to pieces on the paved walkway. From it, a strong odor emitted. A familiar smell. I realized why the bottle looked so familiar. She'd been drinking moonshine. Not just any kind of moonshine. One whiff told me where it was made.

What the heck was this woman doing with moonshine from our village?

She squinted out into the darkness at me.

Our gazes locked.

I placed one finger against my lips and shook my head slowly.

Despite my warning, it looked like she was going to scream.

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Chapter Two

Karis

Earlier that day…

It had not rained in thirty days.

Crumpled blades of grass crunched under my soles as I walked across my lawn and onto the main pathway. The atmosphere was dry and dull. Wisps of sand took flight at the slightest shift in the wind. Morning dew had already been wicked out of the air, but the moisture wasn't enough for the plants that drooped to the ground in distress.

Even as I looked up into the dark, heavy clouds rolling in from the west, I mentally reminded myself that I had two things to look forward to today. Cake to celebrate my birthday. And a rainstorm like no other to wash away old burdens.

I fought the urge of attempting to revive the wilted flowers. My fingers tingled with the need to do something about the current state of the landscape, but I'd have to hold off at least until tomorrow. I missed seeing rainbows pop up here and there after late afternoon showers, but I anticipated I wouldn't have to wait too much longer. Even the air smelled as though rain was on the way. And I was grateful for it and the inspiration it would bring to revive my creativity.

Even though I could paint from memory, I preferred the more vibrant colors of thriving vegetation pulsing with life. Spring was my favorite season, but we still had many more months to go before warmer temperatures arrived. Even now, I was tempted to stop and paint the dreary, gray clouds hovering above the sector of Legance. No matter how dismal this past month had been, it was like the calm before the storm.

As I walked down the trail leading away from the road I lived on, I reached the busiest path. All around me people rushed, trying to get from this place to another in record time, beating the downpour.

Most walked, pulled wagons, or rode on bikes or mechanical scooters. Only the elite citizens of Legance owned cars, and even

then, the means to keep a vehicle running with limited resources were scarce. As far as I knew, no newer model cars had been manufactured for over forty years. All the factories had been wiped out. There was still talent for mechanics and related trades, but the materials and technology were hard to come by. And without the upkeep of roads and highways like they did decades ago, cars could only get a person so far before they ran into an obstacle.

So much had happened in forty years, but I only knew half of it...

I lived in Legance, an upper northwest sector of America. My home was near the city, which was a good thing. Everything I needed—the markets, the lakes and rivers I visited, and Social Circle—were only a short walk away. I was fortunate I had a home near the center of it all, but then again, I knew women my age that would never move near the city. They preferred the countryside where the way of life was just a little bit harder, but they enjoyed more privacy. But I wasn't sure that anything that went on in Legance, even out in the countryside—was truly ever private.

Even in the city, I still found peace and quiet. My work as an oil painter was often done in solitude, sitting somewhere in a park or on the bank of a river, snapping photographs with an old camera my father gave me. The thing was old, *really* old, but it still did what I needed it to do. If things went as planned, I had a contract to develop a painting for some newlyweds. The bride was from the House of Penderton and the daughter of a councilman. They paid me double my usual fees. The contract would probably be the last one I obtained in Legance. I was leaving...

Just like the majority of other unmarried, fertile women of childbearing age in Legance, my freedom wasn't entirely ensured. The strict rules and protocols which they held over our heads were for our protection, they said...and for the perseverance of the human race.

The existence of humankind has been jeopardized with violence and other unseen threats for decades. My grandparents and parents experienced the worst of the disasters that crushed civilization while hurling America into chaos, dividing the land into mega colonies with dictatorial societies very different from the United States they grew up in.

In the present time, the boundaries of the Americas stretched as far as pre-sector Canada to pre-sector Mexico. There were currently

nine major sectors, including Legance. Each sector was said to have more uninhabitable spaces than settled ones. Buildings that stood more than ten stories tall were all crumbling and deemed unsafe to be near. Most smaller towns and neighborhoods were now abandoned; their residents had left to seek protection inside the walls of a sector. Most of Legance's citizens lived as close as possible to our city's center to have easy access to readily available food, energy, and medical resources. Everything else outside the sectors was considered a dead zone; home to outcasts, savages, and other beings that weren't so human. Not knowing what was out there, outside of Legance, discouraged most of our citizens from straying too far.

Yet, I'd leave my home and my sector soon. By choice. I guess...

Someone bumped into me from behind, jolting me from my lingering thoughts.

"Earth to Karis." Cai skipped out in front me.

"Oh hi, Cai." I reached out, and we gave each other a hug. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." She smiled, showing off her dimples. Even without the rays of sunlight washing over Cai's toffee-brown skin, she still had the most flawless complexion I'd ever seen. Her hair was streaked with highlights, enhanced by some dyes she had probably traded an arm and a leg to get her hands on. I wished I was more like her. Carefree. Not afraid.

Cai Phillipe had been my friend for years now, lending an ear and a shoulder whenever I needed one. It never bothered her that I was related by blood to the Governor of Legance, Arthur Wynnell. Many citizens didn't exactly trust the Wynnell family. Most knew I was Arthur's niece and cast judgement before they ever met me. They also knew who my mother was, and to them, that was even worse.

For the past ten years, Arthur from the House of Wynnell had secured power over Legance. Every year, the Wynnell family made deals and solidified unions that ensured they led for yet another year and then more. My upcoming marriage to the governor of a bordering sector would only increase the Wynnell family's wealth, because in the absence of my mother and father, Arthur became my legal guardian.

"Why do you look so worried?" Cai asked. "Cheer up."

"I think I would be cheerful if it didn't look like the sky is going

to drop out on me at any moment."

"Oh yeah, that too. We're about to receive a storm of monstrous proportions." Cai bit her lip. "Do you think it'll be bad? Solomon says this witch in the countryside said that dams will burst and villages will flood and we'll wish that we'd never prayed for rain."

I rolled my eyes. "There are no witches. My mother used to talk about them when I was little, but it's only a fairytale she told me."

"That's what you think, Karis. You should believe more. Not just in your faith, but in other things, too. There are things out there that we'll never see in our lifetime, but every tale has some truth," Cai exclaimed.

"I believe in what I see and what I know," I said.

"Whatever," she replied thickly. "I'm glad I came this way. I thought you'd be at the college in the library, giving art lessons, but someone said you were off today, so I started walking towards your house. Are you playing hooky?"

"It's my birthday. Of course, I called out."

She nudged me playfully. "Well, look at you. Are you getting rebellious?"

"Never."

"Well, are you okay? How could you get sick on your birthday?" Cai frowned. "Wait! Have you seen a nurse lately? They say there's a sickness going around west of the countryside. A lot of people had to take some kind of antibody."

"I'm fine, Cai. I'm not sick."

I continued walking, and she walked alongside me.

"Then what is it?" she asked.

"I had a meeting scheduled this morning with Governor Wynnell, but then it was canceled, and now it's back on again. I'm supposed to be there in fifteen minutes."

Cai rolled her eyes. "You're doing them a big ass favor already. Can't you at least have your birthday to yourself?"

"I know. I know," I breathed. "I wonder if he even remembers."

"Of course, he does. You have to be of age to marry. He knows exactly how old you are. They've been waiting for this day since the day you were born, right?"

"Technically, yes."

"Your marriage to Governor Stefan will strengthen the alliance between Legance and Anchora. You are a Wynnell. By blood. It doesn't matter that your own father was banished. You're still

considered royalty in my eyes."

"It doesn't matter to them, because I am the only one living who can deliver on a promise that was made before I even took my first breath. And the Wynnells still owe Stefan's family a debt. I'm the payment."

She leaned in as we turned the corner, exiting the market. "You can run, you know? Right now. You could escape. If you run fast enough, they might never find you."

"I don't want to run. If my life were in danger, I might, but it's not."

"You might be right. They say that Stefan isn't as bad as his father was. And his father sounded like he was pure evil, even to his own people. No wonder your mother ran from him and from Anchora to marry your father."

I sighed. "And look where it got her."

"It'll be alright. Just go with your gut. You won't end up like your mother, I promise. You're nothing like her," Cai replied.

"I hope not. I've prayed for guidance. Even with these urges."

A corner of Cai's lips twisted upward. "What urges?"

I shook my head. "Never mind."

Cai shrugged. "Well, okay. I'll walk you up to the gates, and then I have to go. You know the Wynnell family won't tolerate seeing the likes of my kind around their pearly white gates."

"Don't say that."

She shrugged. "It's true. By the way, you should be calling him Uncle, not Governor Wynnell. After all, that's what he is to you."

"He's never been an uncle to me. He's the governor, and I abide by the rules just like everyone else," I said.

"But you are not like everyone else, and you know it. I even wonder why you don't live in the House of Wynnell. You're entitled just like his brat children. They're all adults, but they act like kids. And Leon is such an asshole." She rolled her eyes. "I don't know what some of these thirsty chicks around here see in him. He just fucks whoever he pleases and gets away with it."

"Cai..." I giggled.

"What? He does."

I sighed. "Either way, I'm just an orphan. Governor Wynnell thinks of me as the kid his brother left behind. Besides, why would I leave my home? The moment I leave, I give up all my rights to someone else. I grew up there. It's all I have left."

Cai frowned. “And you’re leaving anyway. I get it.”

“I want something of my own before I go. I don’t know what’s in store for me…” I swallowed, trying to rid myself of the lump of nervousness growing in my throat.

“I’m going to miss you so much. But you have to be the luckiest woman in Legance. You’ll be the wife of a governor. Many of us will never get that chance. I just hope you don’t forget about me.”

I hooked my arm around her and pulled her to my side. “Of course, I won’t forget you. I wanted you to come with me.”

“You know I can’t. My mother would kill me. She needs me here to help with the dress shop.”

“But is that really all…? Is that really the reason you want to stay here?” I teased.

“You mean Solomon, don’t you? Mother thinks he’s no good for me,” she said.

“He’s the pastor’s nephew, isn’t he? Why doesn’t she like him?” I asked.

“She says he’s dangerous and that he’ll lead me astray.” And then with a giggle, she said, “He’s in church every Sunday. What more could a mother ask for her daughter?”

“Maybe it’s what he does after church,” I replied.

Her cheeks reddened. “That’s nobody’s business but ours,” she said shyly. “Enough about me. It’s your birthday. We need to do something.”

“I want to, but I have this meeting, and you know I’m not allowed out after sundown as a condition of my betrothal.”

Cai stuck out her tongue. “Party Pooper.” She tugged on my sleeve. “Before we go any further, I have something for you to celebrate. Since there’s only an hour left until sundown, I wanted to give it to you now.” She placed something like glass in my hand.

Looking down, I realized it was a bottle of liquor. “Where’d you get this?” I tried shoving it back into her palm, but she wouldn’t let me. “I can’t take it.”

“You can. I got it for you. Actually, I got one for me too so we could celebrate your big day together, because who knows when Stefan will come for you. Oh, what the hell…take this one, too.”

Before I knew it, she had shoved the second mini bottle of liquor into my front pocket.

“You know we’re not supposed to have this. It’s illegal, and it even looks untaxed. Where’d you get this?”

“Solomon knows a dealer. Don’t worry about it. Just enjoy. It’s your birthday. Just sip slowly. It’s moonshine.”

“Oh, God. Then I really can’t get caught with this. A moonshine dealer? From where?”

“Not from Legance. Not from any place you know about, either.”

“He better be careful. You better be careful,” I warned her.

“I am,” she reassured me. “Anyway, you better get going.” She pointed at the Wynnell gates beyond some large, overhanging trees. “Come see me tomorrow to tell me how your meeting goes.”

“But if the witch’s prophecy is right, we’ll all be underwater,” I joked.

She snorted. “I hope you can swim.”

We giggled like two sisters and parted ways. Like always, after chatting with Cai, I felt better. I wasn’t nervous or anything. That would probably soon change.

I had no idea what the meeting would be about or why it was called so suddenly.

Maybe today was the day. Maybe Stefan Newson had finally come for me.

To take me back to Anchora. To the birthplace of my mother. Where it all began.

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Chapter Three

Karis

Same day, at the mansion…

I almost painted a portrait of the Wynnell mansion once, but something made me change my mind. I couldn't even remember what it was. It was a long time ago before my mother died.

The mansion was massive. Armed security patrolled the grounds. There were more guards than I recalled from the last time I was here. At a recent rally, Arthur Wynnell claimed some of his family members were threatened. He told the attendees that until the perpetrators were caught, they'd see increased security from the protection agency.

Only three months ago, Arthur earned enough votes to secure him another year as the governor. The race had been close, and Arthur won with just fifty-two percent of the votes. He now had reason to believe that every year more and more people resented having him as their governor. The man probably thought there was some coup being set up to challenge his recent win. Arthur Wynnell wasn't a bad governor, not in his earlier years, at least. But the citizens of Legance wanted to see change, and with the Wynnell family in power for so many years, they weren't getting that. And another councilman had surely promised the citizens that they could do better if chosen.

Other sectors had advanced ahead in both technology and agricultural areas while Legance remained behind the curve. The systems that Arthur Wynnell and the rest of the councilman had implemented would sustain Legance's stagnant population for the interim, but it was only a matter of time before something would need fixing. Just last year, I'd heard that our oil and gas reserves had gone down, and had it not been for help from a neighboring sector, we would've been in deep trouble. Trading had never been Arthur Wynnell's forte, but if he wanted to prevail, he'd need to learn how. But what was that old saying? One can never teach an old dog new tricks.

As I entered the great hall, the security guards stood armed with

at least one to every room. The Wynnells were a huge family, so I imagined every level of the mansion was occupied throughout the day. I wasn't a threat to anyone here, of course, so they allowed me to navigate the mansion by myself until I would meet with my Uncle Arthur in his office.

As I passed by what I knew to be the dining hall, maids moved about. In the hall, there was a 20-foot-tall glass wall. The curtains were pulled back to one side. As I walked by, I thought I saw a flash of lightning somewhere off in the distance.

The storm was coming.

I quickened my pace since I knew I was a few minutes late. When I reached the formal office, the doors were already opened. I heard the voice of two men. I knew them. One belonged to Arthur and the other to his oldest son, Leon. It seemed they were bickering, or maybe it just sounded that way.

I stood in the doorway quietly, looking back and forth between the two as they huddled over Arthur's desk, looking at some documents. Their backs faced me, but there was no mistaking that Leon resembled his father, as if they were twins. Arthur was already graying, but he still stood tall and strong whenever I saw him in the city. Both men had broad shoulders and handsome looks that left many women blushing at the sight of them. Even my boss at the library, Ms. Ella, jokingly referred to Arthur as a silver fox.

The Wynnells had always used their good looks and perfected art of persuasion to secure deals, but they'd need more than charm and good deeds to keep their position in this lovely governor's mansion in the near future. Like my mother used to say, a cunning fox led House Wynnell, but the wolves would soon descend. Nothing she said ever made sense until she was gone.

Leon was a different story. He was just as striking as his father, but he had a mysterious and almost unsettling demeanor about him. He seemed to be a man of few words, but his past actions spoke volumes. He was often seen in direct conflict with those who opposed his father's laws. As the lieutenant governor, he had just as much authority as his father. And of course, his father also set him up to be the next governor. All they needed now was to convince the people and council to vote him in when Arthur handed over the reins. Even now, he tried to convince his father of something. They were still leaning over the desk fussing, oblivious to my arrival.

"That is not the way we're going to handle this," Arthur stated,

pounding a fist down on the desk.

"Your plan will make us look weak. It'll make us look as if we give in too much," Leon grumbled.

"Who cares if it makes us look weak? I'm not where I am today because I was predictable or cared about how my actions made me look," Arthur countered.

Before things got too heated between the two, I announced my presence by clearing my throat. "Hi."

Both of them spun around.

Uncle Arthur's eyes lit up. "Karis. Come inside."

I crossed the threshold and nervously wiped my palms on my shirt.

Leon looked at his father. "I thought you canceled this."

"Nothing has been canceled. Karis should know," Arthur stated.

Leon turned his attention back to me, but I couldn't decipher if the look he gave me was one of pity or annoyance. Whenever I came to the mansion in the past, he tended to ignore me. Actually, aside from my uncle, the entire Wynnell family paid me no attention. It didn't matter now. Soon, I would be one less problem they had to worry about.

"Come closer, Karis," Arthur urged. "And don't go anywhere, Leon. You stay here, because we have not finished discussing the upcoming trade deal with Providencia."

Leon plopped down in one of the seats and watched with his dark glare as I walked further into the room. His objectionable gaze traveled up and down the length of me.

"You look just like your mother. When she was this age, she looked just like this. You resemble her in every way," Arthur said.

I didn't know whether to take his statement as a compliment or something else. So many others had told me the same thing, but instead, they meant for the statement to remind me that my mother was known as a whore to almost everyone in Legance. When she was alive, my father wouldn't stand for the way people humiliated her publicly for leaving one man she had promised to marry to fornicate with another. But now that she was dead and he was long gone, he couldn't stop the whispers anymore. I planned to redeem her, and to redeem myself, by agreeing to marry a leader from another sector to keep the peace. I would do what my mother refused to do so very long ago. The deal would be done, and then, they would have nothing to talk about. Nothing, other than the fact

that I would be the wife of a governor—even if it was only in name and in purpose.

"You asked to see me?" I asked.

"Yes, sit down."

As soon as I sat, I suddenly remembered the small bottles of liquor Cai's boyfriend had smuggled into the sector. I pulled down the tail-end of my shirt to cover the bulge.

"Leon just came back from a trip. The hunting games. We have some news about your betrothed. About Stefan."

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

Arthur looked at Leon and then said, "Yes. And no."

"What is it then?"

"Leon...?"

"He's injured. During the games, he...." Leon cleared his throat. "He stepped into the path of someone's arrow. The blade went straight through his shoulder."

"Oh no...that's too bad," I exclaimed.

"Don't worry," Arthur chimed in. "The wedding is still on. Luckily, the arrow didn't hit anything major. He will recover, it seems. Leon promised him that he'd bring you the news. There may be a delay of about a month or two while he recovers, but he will come for you. I have no doubt about that."

I nodded.

"I just wanted to make sure that you haven't gotten impatient and that you understand the...conditions of this arrangement. Even if it takes more than a month or two, you must still remain chaste and intact. Is that clear?"

"I have, and I will." Heat crept up my spine in embarrassment. Talking about my virginity in front of two grown men was never easy. Before, when my mom was alive and my father was still here, all of the arrangements were handled for me. But I was young then and I didn't know anything. Even now, I still had a lot to learn. My desire to learn more was partly what drove me to accept my upcoming nuptials, because I knew this change would open up a whole new world of opportunities, either directly or indirectly.

"Good. Very good. Not many women have your self-control and there is a reason why you must remain untouched. We, myself included, must know that any child born from this union is legitimate."

"I know," I said quietly.

“Your other part of the family. The Chaplin family. They were once a House in the sector of Anchora.”

“Yes. My mother told me. Her father was a councilman for many years. The Chaplin family was one of the founding houses of Anchora.”

“So, back to Anchora you will go. But not to reclaim your family’s former status, but to elevate it. You see, if Stefan remains the governor of Anchora and you become his wife, is that not a greater honor than what was obtained before?”

“It is,” I said.

“And one day, this very union could mean something greater for all of us. For Legance. And for Anchora. You are also a Wynnell by blood. Never forget that, Karis.”

“I won’t.”

Leon shifted in his chair. “Forgive me for saying this, but I don’t see how Karis’s marriage to Stefan will benefit us or Legance. This betrothal was only set up because her mother reneged on her own promise to marry Stefan’s father so long ago, was it not?”

Arthur nodded. “Why yes—”

“Then how does it benefit us, father?” Leon asked. “It only pays for her mother’s betrayal.”

“Her mother Joella is dead. My brother is banished. That leaves Karis as an orphan. An orphan under my care, no less. Stefan still desires to marry her, and he too has paid most dearly for the privilege of keeping his claim intact. We have also traded with him a great deal on these same grounds. Or else, there would be no agreement like this. Let us not forget what he has provided to our sector in our times of need and distress.”

Leon frowned, shaking his head. “Forgive me, but why has he chosen to take her hand in marriage over, let’s say, any other royal bachelorette from another house. Is there something he’s trying to do here? Something he wants. Something that might have flown over your head, Father?”

Leon challenged his father openly. I could only imagine what the council meetings looked like.

Arthur chuckled. “Nothing has flown over my head, son. Everything has gone as planned.”

“Really?” Leon folded his arm over his chest. “Then answer me? Why her over a royal?”

“Take one look at her, Leon. Do not pretend you don’t know

what it is," Arthur demanded.

I looked down at my lap.

"Of course, I do. I hear the other guys talk of her beauty and her body. They are afraid to talk to her because they know they will be arrested for doing so. And for fucking her? Father, I'm sure you'd have them torn apart. She is kin to me, so of course, I do not have the same thoughts. But, can the men in Anchora not find their own women? How many of our fertile women must you send them? What do they do with their own women? We have a total of twelve young women betrothed to bachelors in various other sectors as we speak. That's twelve women that could be reproducing for Legance instead of our neighbors."

"And as you already know, we have six women being brought within our borders this winter as a result of our agreements with other sectors. With the ongoing shortage of women of breeding age, this is the way things are done now, son. We can't keep breeding from within. And you, boy, best go out and find a woman of your own, or I will be picking your betrothed next."

Leon huffed. "I have plenty of women. Just none I want to make my wife."

"That decision will be your downfall," he replied. "And we don't want that, now, do we?"

The statement struck a cord and Leon's face twisted with malice, but before Leon could utter another word, Arthur got up, dismissing the subject, and stood in front of the bay windows, glancing outside at the storm brewing. "Happy birthday," he said.

I was so shocked he remembered, I gasped. "Thank you," I mumbled.

"Have you heard anything from Andy?" he asked.

Him asking about my father, his own brother, also surprised me. He was the one who banished him for a handful of crimes, including treason and fraud. It was so sad. In their youth, the twins, Andy and Arthur, had been inseparable. They did everything together. But now, they seemed like enemies.

My father, I'd heard, had been seen wandering just outside the borders, tagging along on hunting expeditions and trading missions. As far as I knew, he had not violated the rules governing his banishment. But I knew he was close by. I hadn't seen him since he was thrown out, but I wanted to. I needed to know he was okay.

"No. I haven't heard a thing from my father," I said, looking at a

piece of lint on the floor.

"So...he hasn't come back here to find you or speak with you or anything?" Arthur inquired, walking over to his personal bar and pouring scotch into a glass over some ice.

"No. He is banished. Why would he come here and risk being executed?" It was hard thinking of my father being executed, but that was his reality. He would never be allowed to return to Legance. Not in peace, anyway.

Arthur looked up. "For you, I suppose. He never agreed with this betrothal."

"He never agreed with me about anything, but that's what fathers do, right?" I shrugged.

Arthur narrowed his gaze and studied me while sipping his scotch.

I swallowed and then said, "Don't worry, Uncle. I want to go back to Anchora. I know it is my destiny to be there. It may not be to bring honor back to my family's name, but it's something. I can feel it. There's something I must do."

"Yes..." Arthur agreed, looking off into the distance. "You must."

I left the Wynnell mansion that evening with renewed purpose. On the way home, the sky opened up and the rain came down. In the privacy of my backyard and while soaking wet, I danced under the moon and stars while no one was watching. But as the minutes passed by, I began to have second thoughts. It wasn't the first time I had my doubts about going through with this, but I thought I had gotten over my fears.

Why were my doubts creeping up now?

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Chapter Four

Karis

Present time…

He was enormous—the shadowy figure coming for me.

He was shape like a large boulder which had somehow dropped from nowhere out of the sky. I would have heard something like that hit the ground. Or maybe I was drunker than I thought and was only imagining things.

No, this was a man...

I parted my lips to scream, but nothing came out. My shriek of terror got stuck in my throat. Even if I had called out, no one would hear me. It had to have been close to midnight. There was no doubt in my mind that my neighbors were in their beds by now. In their beds…while I skipped about in the rain like a crazy woman taking one too many shots of moonshine.

I should have known this was a bad idea. The way the man hulked towards me while eating up the distance between us, I knew there was no time to run, but I tried to anyway.

I turned around and took off, lunging for the back door.

I never made it inside. I struggled with the doorknob, twisting it this way and that way, but something seemed jammed.

Strange. I had not locked it just to come out to sit on the porch, and I didn't have the keys.

I turned around. The guy stood only a few inches in front of me. I had no idea who this guy was. He looked...*savage.*

"What do you want? Stay away!" I screamed. "You're not supposed to touch me."

He held out his palms to the side as if to suggest he didn't intend to hurt me. I begged to differ.

"Do not scream again," he warned. "We do not wish to shed blood tonight." The deep baritone of his voice rippled through me.

"We?" I stammered. "I don't understand."

"You will." He reached for me, but I drew back, pressing my spine firmly against the locked door.

His expression changed. He lowered his hands, but he still kept

one palm pressed to the door right next to me, preventing any chance of slipping past him.

Was this how it started? Was this how they would take me to the man I was supposed to marry? Everyone knew my fiancé was incredibly unpredictable and sort of sadistic like that.

"I'm not afraid. I will go willingly," I said quietly. But my words didn't sound convincing, not even to myself. I was afraid. Perhaps I'd even changed my mind after thinking it through and drinking myself senseless.

Oh, shoot. What was I thinking?

"That's why you're here, right?" I asked. "To take me to him. Just do it. I'll go. It's time for me to go home anyway."

The guy squinted and seemed confused by my submission. He made no immediate moves. He just glared. His nostrils flared, and his gaze traveled down the length of my body and then back up again. Tipsy from moonshine and drenched from head to toe, I must have looked a mess.

"Where did this come from?" he asked. No, not asked. Demanded.

I couldn't hide my surprise when he held up one of the mini bottles of moonshine that I drank.

"That's not mine," I stuttered.

"You lie."

I gasped. Oh, dear God. Was he going to report me for having an illegal substance?

He didn't exactly look like a saint, himself. He smelled of sin. Sin and sex. He was big and muscular. His bronzed skin gleamed under the moonlight. His eyes—they were a cloudy gray, or maybe even a dull gray. He wore a sleeveless gray sweatshirt. Black ink covered his arms. His hair was long, past his shoulders and unruly. Although he could frighten the living daylights out of just about anyone with his overpowering demeanor, I had to admit he was striking and ruggedly handsome. I'd never seen him. He couldn't have been from this sector. He just looked…different.

I never imagined they would come for me like this. What kind of sadistic trick was this? I thought I'd be granted more time to prepare before someone was sent to snatch me away in the middle of the night. Didn't Arthur say that Stefan was injured and he wouldn't come right away? Maybe this guy didn't get the message.

"Who are you?" I asked, swallowing the dry lump in my throat.

“Demands. Questions. I do not have time for either.”

Once again, his deep voice mesmerized me.

“Come,” he commanded, slipping his big hand around my waist. His touch was just as scorching as his heated stare.

I felt compelled to obey him. Like, what the hell? What was wrong with me? I couldn’t have been all that drunk.

I ignored the little voice in my head telling me to do whatever he said.

I turned and struggled to get the door open again, pushing my shoulders hard against it, trying to shove it open with all my weight. There was no way in hell I would present myself in this flimsy house dress and slides.

I yanked at the doorknob. “Just let me get my st—”

“No.”

He bent down and scooped me up.

I screamed. “What—? How dare you!”

“Do yourself a favor and be quiet. You are quite drunk. Keep screaming, and your neighbors will know.”

He was right. I was in a dangerous position.

“Alright. I won’t scream. Just put me down.”

Surprisingly, he obliged my request and pointed in the direction he wanted me to walk.

“Just tell me who you are,” I begged.

“I’m the man your mother should have warned you about.”

I was speechless and confused. What if this guy wasn’t from Legance or Anchora?

Even if I wanted to run now, I’d never make it. The potency of the moonshine had already taken effect. I could barely put one foot in front of the other. My slides sunk into the mud with each step.

The stranger’s hand was at the small of my back guiding me, yet I was still unsteady.

Right after a wave of nausea hit me, I felt the guy catch my fall. The way he cradled me against his chest calmed my frazzled nerves. Besides, his warmth kept me from shivering, and he smelled like chestnuts and cinnamon.

There was no sense in struggling with the inevitable. I closed my eyes, thinking this could all be part of a moonshine-induced dream.

A dream I wouldn’t forget…

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Chapter Five

Axil

Xonar raced out from behind the bushes with the scent of adrenaline right behind him. I seized up at first, thinking something was wrong until I got closer and realized most everyone was present.

"What the fuck is wrong with her? Can't she walk?" Xonar asked, pointing at the woman I took.

"She passed out," I replied, toting the woman in my arms towards a small group of men composed of trackers: four betas, two Alphas, and me, the Alpha-in-Charge of the mission.

Xonar looked shocked. "Well, did you have to knock her out?"

"I didn't. She's drunk."

"Ha!" Xonar laughed. "You serious? You mean that little weasel is about to marry a drunk?"

"Maybe she needs to drink just to bear the thought that she has to marry the little weasel," Ketil joked, causing a couple of the guys to laugh out loud.

"Is everyone here?" I asked.

I took a quick count. Someone was missing.

"Where is Titus?" I demanded.

"No need to worry about me." Titus unfolded from behind a tree, but he wasn't alone. With him, he brought an unknown human female. She looked confused and frightened.

"What the fuck?" I said in a strained voice. "Did you take her from Legance?"

"What does it matter? She's going with me." Titus was adamant about taking the female. I could tell. It was his prerogative if he wanted to take a female from this sector. He was an Alpha. He could do whatever he pleased, but this was my mission.

"I said stick to the plan. We were here for one woman. This one," I said adamantly. "Nothing else. No one else."

"They were using her like a slave. I can't leave her behind," he said.

Xonar circled Titus and the female. "Do you know something we

don’t, Titus?”

Titus growled and placed his body in front of the female. Xonar straightened his back and narrowed his gaze suspiciously at both of them.

We didn’t have time for this. Two Alphas fighting over the same woman…it happened every damn day in our neck of the woods, but we didn’t have time for that shit now.

“Alright, you two. Enough,” I warned.

“Everything besides the package should be fair game,” Xonar continued. “That female you have...” Xonar pointed at Titus’s female. “Her scent is loud and clear now. She’s extremely fertile. She’s ovulating. That’s what you’ve been hiding. That’s why you didn’t bring her near us before.”

“Please, I didn’t know. Don’t kill me,” the female stammered.

“No one will kill you. No one will touch you except for me,” Titus declared. “Back off, Xonar. I won’t say it again.”

“Xonar...?” I warned.

Finally, Xonar walked away, chuckling to himself.

I shook my head. “Did anyone see you take her, Titus?”

Titus paused just a beat too long, so I concluded he had not taken this girl in secret.

I growled. “Never mind. You knew what the risk was when you took her, and you did it anyway.”

“Our mission is done. You’ve got the package, but this one comes with me.” Titus wasn’t going to budge on the girl. I didn’t blame him.

Off in the distance, I spotted some lights flashing near the back gates of the sector.

“Our mission isn’t done. We must get back to Mistacre before the guards catch up with us,” I said.

“If they catch up to us, we’ll just hang them up like bait for the real monsters out here in these woods,” Xonar stated, picking up a bundle of heavy chains from the ground and hoisting them across his shoulders.

Chains that once bound us were now used to trap and imprison our enemies. In extreme cases, they were even used to kill. This was our way. Wherever we went, wherever we did not belong, they called us the Uncaged.

I had hoped to avoid conflict, at least for now. I had hoped we would escape the woods and cross back over into our territory

within two days. We would have, if everyone stuck to the plan.

I gestured for the men to pick up their things. “We have to head out. We must hunker down in a shelter until the next sunset. I’ll see everyone at checkpoint C in about thirty minutes. You have your routes, so split up and let’s go. If you’re compromised, execute Plan B. Has everyone got that?”

When everyone nodded in the affirmative, we split up as instructed.

When the guards found out we had been in their sector or took something from it, they’d be on our tails with their guns and rifles. I wanted us to be gone from the area before that happened. And before they found those unconscious guards we left behind.

I had a small hunch about the woman in my arms. I would bet everything I owned that she was worth way more than I first realized. But months ago when I overheard Stefan Newson bragging about his upcoming marriage to the woman, I knew taking her as a hostage would be the only way he’d cave and live up to his end of a bargain he swore to keep. And if she were that important to him, he would.

Stefan made a grave mistake when he reneged and then threatened to harm my people. But now, I had something he wanted, someone he’d been waiting for for a very long time.

That little weasel could’ve had any chick in his sector, but he chose this one. And just by looking at her, I already knew one reason. She was exceptionally beautiful. But looks could deceive any old fool.

There was something odd about the woman; I felt it in my gut.

My instincts had never been wrong.

None of that mattered, though.

I had something my enemy needed. In exchange for her release, he would fulfill the agreement he made with us.

No one took from us.

No one.

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Chapter Six

Axil

I stood by the bedside, looking down at the woman I'd stolen. She had stirred a few times during our journey and after I placed her on the bed, but she had not woken up yet.

That was a good thing, probably. Back at her house, it looked like she would put up a fight if she had just an ounce more of energy left in her.

However, soon she would wake up…

The light from the lamp was dull, flickering every few seconds.

Even with damp clothes, I could still make out her womanly physique easily. Slender legs. Rounded hips. Perky breasts. Her skin was flawless. I'd seen plenty of human women up close and personal, but something about this one was truly different.

Noises drifted through the open door from the level above me. My kind got loud and rambunctious, especially after a good meal and a few drinks. Like myself, most of them hadn't slept in almost a day.

The smell of grilled goose and rabbit stew floated through the door, but none of that fueled my hunger.

All around me, I heard rumblings of critters moving and shifting through the earth. The walls of the underground bunker were heavily fortified, and the structure could withstand almost anything, so I wasn't concerned. Its indestructible build was why it was still in livable condition to this day. Within its walls were possessions that were decades old. It was difficult to think that the bunker was probably used as a fallout shelter when Earth went to shit.

Life was different for us back then.

Ultimately, the catastrophic events that nearly annihilated the entire human race were what freed my kind from an eternity of pain and suffering. In the midst of chaos, a new race of modified human hybrids escaped their cages with one goal—to survive.

"Axil?"

I turned to find Porter's wife holding some folded garments in

one hand and a bowl of steaming stew in the other.

"Porter said you needed some dry clothes for the girl," Porter's wife exclaimed, coming inside the room and putting the bowl of soup on a table by the door. She set the garments on the bedside table near the lamp and then opened one of the chest drawers and pulled out some blankets. "You haven't rested since you got here. You don't have to stand guard. Besides Porter and I, the only person that comes here is our son. If you want, I can have Porter drag another cot in here if you need one, or you can take one of the bunks down the hall."

"Thank you, but we'll be gone soon. I can rest when I get home. I appreciate the hospitality, Mrs. Porter."

"It's no problem. We can always count on you boys to bring us supplies out here when we need it," she said.

Porter and his wife were what most people considered wildlings or travelers. They lived outside sector borders and didn't belong to any clan or group. They roamed freely from place to place depending on the season. But as for Porter and his wife, this secret underground bunker was their permanent home.

She looked away from me and stared at the woman on the bed. "You should wake her up and get her in dry clothes. She's not immune to human viruses like you are. You don't want her to catch pneumonia now, do you?"

I picked up the stack of clothes just as Mrs. Porter left the room.

She was right. The woman was curled up on the bed as if she were cold.

Starting at the nape of her neck, I undid the drawstring and pushed her dress down one shoulder. It felt like I was holding my breath the whole time. She smelled so fucking good; I wanted to devour every last inch of her. Her skin was soft. Every curve I encountered as I pulled the wet garment made me lust for her even more. Her backside was firm and full. The plumpness of her pussy lips beckoned me. The scent of honeysuckle was stronger than ever before. I inhaled deeply and dragged my attention from her body to her face.

Her forehead crinkled, and she exhaled softly. For a moment, I thought she would wake up, but she only fell deeper into slumber.

She was still laying on her side once she was fully naked. Her body was perfect. I could stare at her all night long, but what disturbed me was a very long scar that covered the center of her

back.

Three long slashes. All three were well-healed over and puckered. They resembled claw marks.

I growled inwardly, angry that someone, or something, had caused her such injury. And to her back.

Despite the deep scars, she was like a work of art. Just like the paintings and drawings I saw in display in her home. Judging from the number of art supplies, brushes, and paint tubes in her home, I concluded that she had painted the beautiful pieces.

After getting her dressed, I grabbed the bowl of soup that Porter's wife left for me and sat with my back against the wall by the door to eat.

Soon, the woman would wake up. And she'd want answers.

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Chapter Seven

Karis

I wasn't alone—I didn't have to open my eyes to know that.

I woke up to unfamiliar sounds and voices. I knew this wasn't my bedroom, and I wasn't home.

Memories of brawny arms carrying me into what I thought was some peaceful dreamland came back to me. Then, reality set in. *I was abducted on my birthday!*

I bolted upright and looked around. The room was small and only had the bare minimum inside. A bedside table, a lamp, a bed, and a dining area suited for maybe one person. Torn pieces of sketches of buildings and landscape hung on the walls. The smell of wet earth lingered all around.

Just as I swung both feet over the edge of the bed, the warm blanket slid down my torso.

I gasped when I realized I was wearing someone else's clothes. The shirt was a bit oversized and slipped to one side, revealing my shoulder and top of my back. I adjusted the garment to cover my entire back and slowly rose from the bed.

A wave of nausea hit me like a freight train, and I grabbed hold of the edge of the table to steady myself.

My mouth was dry and tasted of alcohol. I swallowed to wet my throat.

More voices drifted through the door, which was left open slightly.

As my eyes searched around for something to show what was going on, the only images that kept coming to me were images of him.

Where was I? What was this place?

This was no way for a husband-to-be to pick up his future wife.

Was this a trick? A surprise?

Was this a test of my strength?

How odd that there were no windows in the room? The furniture reminded me of something I'd seen in a decades-old magazine last year. Of things that once were. Of things that were

once forgotten. And I stood in the center of it all.

A grumble that had to have been as loud as the voices I heard erupted from my belly. I was hungry and running on empty, but that was the least of my worries.

Something shifted in the air, and I got this weird feeling that someone was approaching.

Sure enough, I detected heavy footsteps just outside the door.

I scrambled around to the other side of the room, knowing full well that a wrought iron twin bed would not stop anyone or anything from coming for me.

The door swung open, and my eyes locked immediately on the same muscular guy with cloudy gray eyes. I hadn't realized just how huge he was last night, but I could see him clearly now. He was so tall he had to duck his head under the door frame to come inside the room.

He wore the same rugged expression as last night. I held my, breath because it looked like he was about to charge for me again.

As he approached, my gut instincts told me to fight, and something else told me to give in. The intensity of his gaze had me frozen in time like a deer in headlights.

He was shirtless this time. Scars and scrapes riddled his chest, shoulders, and neck. Not only did black ink cover his arms, but intricate symbols also covered his chest. The waistband of his pants hung loosely on his hips, showing off a very defined Adonis belt. The weird thing was that he wore chains for a belt. Who the hell wore heavy chains around their waist like that?

My chest tightened, and my lips parted, but nothing came out.

He halted a mere foot in front of me and reached out.

I shrunk back. "No."

"It's time to go."

"What? Where? Who are you? What is this place?" My questions rambled from me as I panicked.

"I am Axil. You are in Providencia. Time to go," he said, reaching for me again as if his brief answers would suffice.

I lunged away from him, backing myself into the next corner. The door was wide open this time, and I could hear many men outside in a hallway.

"Why am I here?" I asked. "Don't come any closer, please. I don't know you."

"You are here because I brought you here."

My gaze searched him again, and my attention landed on a very recognizable tattoo high on his chest of a skull wearing a crown. The mark was associated with a particular clan of savages.

"You…you…you're one of them."

The guy cocked his head to one side and narrowed his gaze.

"You're a savage!" I blurted out.

My declaration seemed to shock him as his eyes widened a bit, and then he frowned.

I took that moment to run, slamming the door in his face and bolting down a dark hallway.

To my surprise, I ended up in a room where other savage-looking men lurked. They were just as shocked to see me as I was to see them.

Despite all of my efforts, I couldn't find a door out of this place. The men laughed. One folded his arms across his chest and shook his head while grinning.

"Let me out, you savages!" I cried out.

I backed away from them, nearly tripping on a ladder in the middle of the floor. Dirt and debris fell from the ceiling into my face. Some of it got into my eyes and mouth. I looked up again and noticed a small exit door in the ceiling right above the ladder.

The doors were overhead!

I made it halfway up the ladder before big hands grabbed my waist and pulled me away.

The gray-eyed, hunky man threw me over his shoulder and marched back out of the room.

The other savages still laughed as if this was all some joke to them.

"Put me down, you ape!" I pounded my fists into his back.

"Calm down, little one. You're making a ruckus for no reason at all," he said.

Why did his deep-toned voice soothe me as it did? Why was my body responding in ways that would ensure my quick demise? I was supposed to be fighting him, not giving in.

"Don't call me little one. I'm not little."

"You are. They have not been feeding you enough."

The nerve of this guy. Who did he think he was?

"I know who you are. I know what you are. You're an animal. An uncaged animal! Why did you take me from my home?"

"I will answer that when you calm down." He kicked a door

shut, locking us into a room.

"You will answer me now. I—"

He tossed me abruptly on a bed; the same bed I woke up in. I scurried as far away as I could get, pressing myself against the headboard. I pulled the oversized shirt up to cover most of my exposed areas, but this arrogant animal had probably seen everything already.

"Why did you take my clothes off?" I demanded.

"They were wet," he replied.

"Give them back."

"I will once they are dry," he said. "How did you get the scars?"

"Scars?" I shook my head.

"On your back. Who did that to you?" He frowned.

I turned away. "I never gave you permission to undress me."

"It was necessary."

"It wasn't. I don't know who you think I am, but I don't belong here with you. You're dangerous…that's what they say."

"You dance in the chilly rain. You go out unprotected at night. You drink two bottles of moonshine. You pass out in the dark. 'Tis dangerous for a woman. Is it not?" He tossed me a challenging glance.

"I didn't pass out. You *took* me."

"I did."

"But why?"

"Don't worry. I'll give you back."

He turned around and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Stay."

I got off the bed and stood up. "You can't just leave me here. I'm not some…" I searched for a word, "…pet dog to be stolen and then thrown into a room and told to stay."

"Of course not," he stated and left.

The sound of chains and a latch clicking told me he had bolted me inside.

"Come back!" I demanded, listening as the noise from his heavy footsteps faded. "Bastard," I huffed. Then in a soft whisper, I muttered, "What the hell?"

Was he even coming back to explain himself?

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Chapter Eight

Karis

The mysterious man didn't leave me alone for long. He brought my neatly folded clothes with him this time along with a bowl of food.

"You should eat." He set the bowl on the table.

Whatever was inside was piping hot and smelled delicious. He could've been trying to poison me and I was ready to fall for it because I was so hungry.

"Can I have my clothes please?" I asked.

He handed me the clothes, and I looked them over.

I had thought about my fate the entire time he was gone from the room. The only plausible explanation I had for being abducted by savages was that I wasn't really abducted.

Had Stefan, my betrothed, actually planned this? And why would he send an uncaged savage to do this? Something didn't make sense.

Or maybe it was just as simple as someone ratting me out for having the liquor. Punishments for being in possession of untaxed liquors could be as trivial as some community service or as cruel as a months-long prison sentence and even banishment.

"Did I do something wrong? Is this a prison?" I asked.

The corner of his lip curled up as if he were amused, and he replied, "No."

"My bladder is going to burst if you don't show me where the bathroom is," I said, trying not to twitch too much to keep from peeing myself.

"Follow me," he commanded.

I rose from the bed and followed him back down the darkened corridor.

"Only prisoners are treated this way," I commented.

"Really?" he exclaimed sarcastically.

"You're a criminal, banished from ever crossing into Legance borders. If you've taken me from my sector without my governor's permission, then you do know that you'll be in a whole heap of

trouble when they find me, don't you?"

"I'm already in a whole heap of trouble. What's one heap more?" He smirked at me.

I tried to get answers from him about why he took me, but nothing seemed to work. Not only was he a criminal, he was also a smug asshat.

"I hope you've got a big shovel," I shot back.

He shook his head. "No…I've got big hands."

Just as I was about to respond, I saw a woman coming out of another room at the end of the corridor. It shocked me to see another woman, but it didn't appear that she was being forced along by a savage or anything like that. Instead, she carried what looked like a meal tray in her hand. When she saw me, she stopped and looked. As if her presence had been a figment of my imagination, she slipped around the corner and was gone.

I turned around and glanced up at my captor. Before I could ask any questions, he halted beside a door and pushed it open. "Empty your bladder. And be quick about it."

With a huff, I closed myself up inside the small bathroom, shutting the door on his face.

The toilet looked weird. It wasn't like any other toilet I'd seen before. There was no water in the bowl and nothing to flush waste out. However, everything appeared to be clean.

Unable to hold my pee long enough to figure things out, I did my business and used the metal sink with the rusty faucet to clean myself as best I could. The paper towels were rough against my face and other parts of my body, but not knowing when I'd be able to take a real bath again, I forced myself to handle the discomfort.

I peeked out the door when I was done. But of course, he was waiting right there, leaned up against the wall.

Those men that laughed at me early down the hall were still laughing and loud as hell.

"Are the rest of those men like you, uncaged savages?" I asked.

He frowned and pointed back down the hall toward the room. I started walking, and he followed closely behind. As we were walking, I turned around and caught a glimpse of his head hung slightly low with him gnawing his bottom lips. He threw me a long, painful gaze, grabbed my forearm, and rushed me forward and into the room.

"You don't have to force me!" I bit out through clenched teeth.

“I wouldn’t ask so many questions if you told me what you wanted and why you have me here. You don’t have to be so rude.”

A sour look covered his face. “Savages are rude, aren’t they?”

It was clear I had offended him. Well, of course, he didn’t like to be called a savage. I felt bad, but ever since the day I was born, I’d only come to know his kind as savages who were left uncaged. They were feral men and women who lived among ruins and wore a tattoo image with the skull of their dead leader.

I swallowed and asked, “Well, you are an uncaged person, aren’t you?”

Like all of the other times, I didn’t expect an answer, but this time, he actually provided some useful information.

“That’s what you call us. *The Uncaged*. Savages. You and your kind are ignorant in your classification of us. We are simply *of the blood*,” he said.

“*Of the blood?* What does that mean?”

He blinked at me. “You mean you don’t know?”

In my sector, we were forbidden to actively seek information on the uncaged savages, just as we were forbidden to have contact with them. They were considered enemies of our sector and were never welcomed. It was rumored that some sectors traded with them, but not Legance.”

I learned about them by accident. Well, maybe it wasn’t an accident that I snuck up on a family camping when I was just thirteen years old. The father had all of his children huddled around, telling them a story, which many thought was a myth or just a scare tactic to keep us in our sector and discourage us from traveling or abandoning it. Even before I eavesdropped on the story, I’d always known the legend of the uncaged held some truth to it.

Apparently, it all started as some medical research experiment funded by the federal government at an off-the-grid maximum-security military prison. Scientists somehow managed to mix the DNA of a rare species of wolf with test subjects at the prison. These scientists were eager to sell the concept of war wolves to the military.

The government must have been convinced with the idea of a super soldier, because all of this happened before the world began to collapse, yet, federal funding for this military project continued during the worst phase. While humans were dying waiting on cures and medications to viruses and ailments never seen before, the

research facility forged ahead.

When the funding stopped and the DNA injections could no longer be administered, they took drastic measures. Willing and unwilling women were thrown into cells with these war wolves and forced to reproduce. Dozens of offspring were born in the lab. The uncaged were all born prisoners in the middle of the apocalypse.

Unable to cope in a dying society, the head warden of the prison went crazy. Not even his meds could control his psychotic episodes. After the subservient scientists transferred the mutant war wolves and other test subjects back to their cages, the warden would have them tortured. The most cruel form of torture whispered about was having the test subjects strapped down with heavy chains and injuring them inhumanely and brutally and then observing to see how long it took the injuries to heal without medical intervention.

While all this was happening, the governments, both U.S. and foreign, had decided that the only cure to a virus-plagued humanity on the brink of extinction was a near total wipeout. With no warning at all, the bombs were dropped over every major city in the world.

To this day, there are two different stories circulating about how the war wolves escaped their cages. In one story, it was said that the walls of the prison collapsed because of the bombs. And then, there was another story about the war wolves taking on the wardens and the scientists to eventually break themselves free.

When the war wolves got out of their cages, they took revenge everywhere, toppled and destroyed many reestablishing communities, and became known as savages. Many would say that it was in their very DNA to be angry and bitter. It was in their DNA to act like savages.

And of course, I sensed some of this aggravation now as he stood with his arms crossed over his chest, giving me a stern once over.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. My declaration came out without warning. I apologized for something I didn’t do, but yet I did it anyway. “I didn’t mean to call you a sav—”

“Don’t say it.” My words were cut off when he came to stand in front of me with only inches separating us.

My head spun again, and my heart beat so fast I thought my lungs would collapse in my chest.

He slipped his palm against my neck, sliding it back on my nape. He was gentle when he touched me, but his fiery eyes told a

different story. The gray of his irises were almost black now. And just as his gentle touch conflicted with his murderous gaze, my panicked breath conflicted with the desirous heat rising through my body.

He pressed his nose softly against my temple and inhaled. He held his face close to mine for what seemed like forever, and I let him. He smelled of cinnamon and of the forest. He smelled like home.

I placed my palm on his chest, which felt hard like granite. His core rose and fell as he breathed in and out.

"Axil..."

When I said his name for the first time, his gaze softened. He looked away swiftly, and when he met my gaze again, his face was a stormy mix of expressions.

He leaned in and in a low voice, he commanded, "You will dress, eat, and then we will go. No more questions, little one. Do not attempt to sway me."

Then he was gone.

My breath rushed out of me.

I was alone in this.

Alone...with no answers.

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Chapter Nine

Axil

Face the woman…or abort duties and let someone else take over…

That was the dilemma. My dilemma. Or maybe it wasn't even a dilemma at all, but a test.

I stood outside the room door, knowing that the moment I stepped foot inside, I'd be enveloped by her sweet scent. Her smell was the very thing that drove my urges. There was no other explanation.

Whenever I left the room, every part of me, down to my very taste buds yearned for more connection with her. On the other hand, whenever I was near her, it took all of my energy to rein in control.

I had no idea why she had this crippling effect on me. I should've been angry. All her kind did was murder, cheat, and steal, and then when the favor was returned, we were labeled savages for it.

Her betrothed, Stefan Newson, was the real savage. Her governor wasn't any better. I'd already heard the rumors about him and his arrogant, stupid son. They did what they wanted in order to survive and to flourish. Well, so did we. We were less than human, according to them, but I found no humanity in the way they treated some of their own citizens.

I pushed myself inside the room.

Startled, she rose from the bed. She looked like a breath of fresh air in her dress, which suited her small, curvy frame. She had braided her hair up on both sides and somehow twisted it into a bun. Wisps of hair had already escaped, framing her oval face. Once we crossed the North Valley, the temperatures would dip and the flimsy garment would not keep her warm. I even wondered if she had thick enough skin to withstand the volatile temperatures of Mistacre. It didn't matter. I wouldn't keep her long. Once her fiancé understood what was on the line, he'd come for her. He'd want her back. I could almost guarantee it. Just one look at her, and any man would be able to perceive her entire worth.

I glanced at the bowl on the table and was relieved that she had eaten almost all of the stew. She was suspicious of me, but she wasn't self-destructive. That was a good thing. We'd travel on foot until the next sundown, which wasn't very far away.

She didn't say a word as I stepped aside and motioned with my chin for her to come out of the room. I led her down the corridor and into the main room. She looked around, as if realizing it was the same room she'd ran into earlier.

I helped her climb up the ladder, out of the bunker, and into the forest.

Once she stood on the ground, she gasped and turned toward the setting sun. A mix of red, orange, and yellows blended together on the horizon. It was beautiful. Especially the way her cinnamon brown hair was sun-kissed. A light wind picked up and her tendril blew lightly against her face. She lifted her nose to the breeze, inhaled, and then exhaled. With it, the wind carried her honeysuckle aroma towards me.

I wasn't the only one who noticed her appeal. Xonar, who'd been stuffing things in his bag, rose from his crouched position and lifted his nose. I followed his stare to the woman. As if he detected me staring at him, he caught my gaze, gnawed on his bottom lip, and stroked his chin. He turned away as if he sensed nothing, but just like him, I was an Alpha.

Something was off about her—this human woman. I knew it. Xonar knew it. The only other Alpha on the mission was Titus, but he was too occupied with keeping his human captive to himself. Even now, the human he took with him was still close by his side and wearing a heavy anorak coat he'd given her. From the smell of it, Titus had already fucked this female, probably over and over again. By now, the female would've been covered in his signature scent, preventing any other Alpha from knowing or learning her smell.

There was a time when men in my clan used to hunt for our women. And for an Alpha like me, it was imperative that I either controlled my ruts by hunting and then bedding a female, or heavily isolating myself. For the longest time, I've chosen the latter.

There were only a few things that could send me into a rut, but the little human I just snatched had just become a new addition to the list. Since she was my mission, I couldn't avoid her. This was going to be the hardest feat I'd ever dealt with in my life. Yet, there

were men I knew that would do anything to trade places with me.

In my clan, you fit into one of several gender types. Common male or female—or just simply ordinary humans. The beta population was numerous and increasing by the year. We had lots of those. Omega females were quite unique in that they were the only type in which an Alpha could develop a true mate bond with, greatly increasing the chances of reproduction of every gender. But, Omegas were rare. And then there were Alphas, like me, who were the sole carriers of the Alpha gene.

Human Alphas, betas, and omegas have existed as long as ordinary humans have existed. Modified Alphas, betas, and omegas were created almost forty years ago through DNA mixing of two species. Whether modified or not, those who have the gene and identify with us are part of our clan.

When people learn that we existed even before they dropped the bomb that killed billions, many are surprised. But, the genes were here all along; they were just significantly suppressed in the humans who carried them.

Modified humans were not created by accident. In an attempt to create a super soldier, a scientist injected the DNA of an Alpha wolf into a human Marine with a suppressed Alpha gene. They got more than they bargained for, awakening his Alpha gene and then training him to become a skilled assassin.

The injection altered his DNA forever. He became an asset of the government until they lost him. He went out on a mission one day and never came back. Many trials later, they were able to create more just like him. But this time, subsequent assets were kept in cages and studied. Orders were given to keep the assets chained until the scientists learned how to fully control them. That day never came.

To this day, no one has been able to control us. To keep humans away from us, we're incorrectly labeled violent savages.

"Wait! Wait!" Mrs. Porter yelled out.

I spun around to see her running toward us with a package in her hand.

The woman turned around swiftly and looked surprised to see Mrs. Porter, but this wasn't the first time she'd seen our host.

"I hope it's okay, but I found some pants I can't fit into anymore and hiking boots for your companion," Mrs. Porter said, holding up a cloth-rolled bundle and a pair of handmade boots.

When Mrs. Porter handed the bundle to the woman, she looked taken aback at first.

"Thank you," she said.

"Oh, dear. You must be so scared. Don't be..."

"That's enough," I told Mrs. Porter.

Mrs. Porter nodded and stepped back, but I knew she couldn't hold back for long. The woman had a mouth that ran like water. "You won't last long in those flats, dear. Do yourself a favor and put on those boots. I cut some pieces of ginger for you. They're wrapped in the banana leaves. Just crush them in some water and it'll help with your nausea."

"I saw you earlier in the hall. You live in the bunker," the woman replied, shaking her head. "I remember now...you put the ice pack on my forehead. I fell asleep...I..."

Mrs. Porter nodded, and then after seeing my look of disapproval, stepped back and hurried toward the shelter. "Have a safe trip, fellows. I will see you again soon, I presume," she called out, waving. "And be careful of the bears."

"Come," I told the woman, calling out to the rest of my crew.

"Wait," she said, kicking off her flats. Just as Mrs. Porter suggested, she slipped on the boots and tucked her own shoes into the bundle. As we waited on the other men to gather around, she asked, "Are there really bears where you're taking me?"

"Yes."

The smell of fresh fear surrounded her once I confirmed there were predators. The reaction only heightened her signature scent. A need to protect her rose within me.

Xonar was close by, and we exchanged glances once again. He walked up to me, and in a lowered voice that only I could hear, he asked, "Is there an issue with the girl, Axil?"

"No, Xonar. We move forward like we planned. Our people's lives depend on it."

My clan's future depended on a successful mission.

If I failed...

Well, if I failed, I didn't even want to think about the consequences.

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Chapter Ten

Karis

I'd never been outside the walls of Legance this long before.

I took a moment to enjoy the view when we stopped at yet another stream to refresh and refill water canteens.

I couldn't understand why I wasn't afraid or trying to run at the first sign that Axil wasn't paying attention. Something deep inside told me I was safe exactly where I was. I still had no idea why I was Axil's target. I had a feeling my life had taken a swift one-eighty the moment he took me from my sector.

I rose from the stream, holding up a flawless red pebble I found at the water's edge. When I turned around to discover that Axil wasn't right behind me, I panicked. Sure, the other men from his group loitered around nearby and I wasn't alone, but I thought he'd been right there.

My heart quickened as I looked for him. When he came out of nowhere, I exhaled.

He lifted the hand that held the pebble, checked it, and then folded my fingers over the rock again.

"I think I know why you took me," I said.

Axil's eyes widened for a split second. "Go on."

"Was it something my father did?"

He picked up my bundle which was on the ground near my feet and threw it over his left shoulder. I followed him away from the stream.

"Well, was it? Did he do something bad?" I demanded.

"I don't even know who your father is," he stated.

I frowned. "You don't? But you know who I am?"

"Yes."

"You don't even know my name, though."

He stopped and turned around. "What is your name?"

I paused, looking at the ground. "Karis."

"It is good to know, but I do not require your name for what comes next," he said.

"What comes next?"

“You’ll get your questions asked no matter what, won’t you?” He grinned. “The less you know, the better.”

“H-has it got something to do with my…mother?” I asked, trying not to sound so fearful before he answered that question.

He must have detected the change in my demeanor, because he squinted and cocked his head to one side. “Is your mother in Legance?”

“She is dead.”

He stared blankly at me. “I am sorry.”

I swallowed. “So, my father and mother are out of the equation. I—”

“Every question you ask from here on out will require a favor,” he said.

I folded my arms across my chest. “I can always ask that guy over there with the red hair. The one you call Xonar. He’s been looking at me since we left the bunker. He knows something.”

It was a mistake mentioning the guy.

The growl that came from Axil’s chest sounded like a warning from an angry wolf.

Axil was also quick and agile like a wolf. His fingers gathered up some hair at the back of my neck and his lips brushed against my jugular before I could lift a finger.

“Do not ever threaten to go to another Alpha. Ever. If another Alpha touches you, it will not bode well for them,” he rasped.

My body responded with heated lust. His rough, calloused fingers soothed my skin in ways I didn’t think were possible. Just like his presence, the tone of his voice calmed my racing heart.

“Alpha?” I repeated.

It was the first time I had heard anyone speak that word and apply the title to themself in the same sentence.

“Yes, little one. I am an Alpha.”

“Then it is true what they say. You have animalistic instincts.”

I thought my observation would further agitate him, but that wasn’t the case. This time when he growled, I wasn’t afraid. His scent was a mix of chestnuts, cinnamon, and strong musk. I inhaled and grasped at his forearms, only because I thought my knees would weaken even more and my feet would give out from under me.

“Do you understand now why you must keep close?” he asked. “You are my responsibility.”

“Yes. I think so.”

“The only thing standing between you and the dozens of other Alphas in my village is me. I took you for a reason, and none of this is your fault. That, I’m almost certain of.”

“So, what do I do…now that you’ve taken me?” I asked.

“If I were you, I would’ve ran from your sector a long time ago, little one. But it’s too late.”

I searched his gaze. “Is it?”

He bit his bottom lip. “I will say this. You are not like them. The man you were set to marry…he waits like a common one, leaving you unprotected. If things were in my favor…if I had caught you under any other circumstances, I would claim you like only an Alpha can claim a woman. I would bury my teeth in your neck—here—and give you my mark…just here…”

His warm tongue trailed along the curve of my neck and he continued, “I’d do this all while burying my cock in your tight pussy over and over again. And once I knotted deep inside your cunt, you’d know what I am. There would never be any question as to who I am. You’d carry my scent, and everyone would know that I made my claim.”

I panted. My lips parted, anticipating something more.

He continued, “Do not test me, little one. If I must keep you in line just as I mentioned, you will never be the same again. You understand, now, don’t you?”

I nodded. “Yes, I understand you completely.”

“Good.”

When he parted from me, the warmth that was once there withdrew from me. Axil was right about one thing: I had no idea how much power an Alpha could hold over someone until then.

Realizing why I might have been taken, I tightened my grip around the red pebble.

Axil had a grudge against my betrothed, against Stefan. I was certain, because who else could it be?

I had always had a bad feeling about Stefan, even though I knew that nothing I did would change the fact that I’d been promised to him since before my birth.

All of this left me wondering what Stefan would have possibly done to anger Axil and his clan.

I’d been fooled and brainwashed into thinking they were just uncaged savages, but the way in which they infiltrated a heavily

guarded sector to kidnap me and then leave without a trace told me they were smarter than everyone thought. After all, it was in their DNA. Axil and his men possessed the genes of super soldiers and one of the most intelligent apex predators on the planet—the wolf.

The killer grizzly bears weren't the only predator I needed to be weary of.

Dozens of Alphas.

Axil was the only man between me and dozens of Alphas just like him.

Were they dangerous, or was his warning just that—empty?

My answer came when I spotted a man I'd heard them call Titus sitting under a tree. His head was leaned back against the trunk, and his eyes were closed as if he were resting. The girl that I recognized from Legance was seated between his legs with her back against his chest and she was sleeping. She was covered from neck to toe with a fur coat that looked like it belonged to a very big man. It was too hot for a coat like that, but it did a good job of covering her up. I knew it wasn't her garment. We didn't have anything like that in Legance. I noted how Titus wrapped his arms possessively around her. She didn't seem scared at all, almost as if she had accepted being taken. As if she enjoyed being with Titus.

I could see why. I shifted my gaze back to the hunk called Axil. Although these men were downright dangerous and not to be messed with, they also seemed fiercely protective of whatever, and maybe even whoever, they claimed was theirs.

But too bad I was already claimed. And Axil knew that.

I held out my hand. "My bag. I can carry it myself."

"I know. Come. You're tired. I'll make a tent, and we'll shelter here and get some sleep."

I wasn't going to argue with him. Although I enjoyed venturing out for inspiration for an art piece, hiking was never one of my strong suits.

After it was all said and done, I knew I'd have enough inspiration to last me for a very, very long time.

But didn't I want this inspiration to become my every day reality?

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Chapter Eleven

Axil

When I crawled back into the tent after my men and I marked our temporary territories for the night, Karis was fast asleep. A fur blanket covered her body. Her hair was fanned out on the soft bundle she used as a makeshift pillow. Her forehead was peppered in sweat. She fidgeted in her sleep and she seemed a bit troubled.

I moved the blanket off her shoulders to relieve her from the heat, then sat on the ground next to her. She was lying on her side with her back turned to me. Her hair had come undone from the bun during dinner. It had taken everything in me to keep my hands off her. I still didn't know how this little human could affect me this way.

The red pebble she'd been looking at since she found it near the stream had slipped from her fingers. I picked it up and pushed it down into my pocket.

Leaning forward, I pressed my fingers lightly against a visible portion of a bruise across her back. Knowing that she must have suffered made me angry. As I recalled the scar, I realized something like that couldn't have come from any human. Enormous hands or claws made the marks.

She whispered something in her sleep and then turned. I noted the slow rise and fall of her breasts against her top. Her nipples were hard. I wanted to yank the coverings from her body and devour every part of her. My cock hardened for her and my knot swelled just thinking about how juicy her pussy must have been. She was ripe and untouched.

The whole interior of the tent smelled of her.

I could wake her up right now, part her legs, and bury my tongue between her slick folds until she spilled her honey for me. Just one taste and maybe it would be enough to get me through this rut until I could hold up somewhere deep in the woods away from temptations.

"Fuck!" I mumbled, grabbing my crotch and adjusting the position. Touching myself caused me to get even more excited.

“Please…no…,” she whispered, shaking her head. *“The bear…it hurts.”*

Her words caught me off guard, but when I peered at her face, I realized she was still deep in slumber.

“Won’t leave. I promise. No, mother…”

I looked on in shock, because I’d never seen someone in so much stress while they slept.

This time when she turned, she tossed the covers off her body.

One inhale later and I was just about done for. As plain as day was the evidence of her slick melting down her thighs.

What the hell?

No…this couldn’t be.

But the aroma of her sweet-smelling slick now confirmed my earlier instincts.

Her heat rose steadily. Only an omega could go through a transition like this.

As her sweet smell grew stronger, I squeezed my hand around my shaft. Pre-cum rolled down my fingers. If I didn’t do something now, I would burst.

Before me lay an omega. Not just any omega. *A human omega.* And she hid this truth from me.

What she could not hide was the translucent slick coating the insides of her thighs and the tell-tale metallic scent of an approaching fertile phase as she thrashed around, either bothered by her heat or something she was dreaming about. Nothing could override the fact that her womb was preparing to take an Alpha’s seed.

If I didn’t get out of here, I knew what would happen.

I’d end up fucking her.

I’d end up claiming her.

And then…it’d all be over.

Fuck.

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Chapter Twelve

Karis

Something snapped in the distance to the right of me. I paused and surveyed the surrounding area.

Nothing.

I looked back down at the red oval compass in my palm, careful not to lose direction. I wasn't even supposed to be this far out, but I knew I'd get back home in time for supper since I had my compass to guide me.

I thought I heard voices off in the distance, and this time, I halted in my tracks.

Maybe I wasn't the only one out here.

The voices grew near.

"Crap," I exclaimed and then raced behind a tree.

If any of the rangers or scouters caught me out here, they'd most certainly tell my mother.

I raised my palm near my eyebrows to shield the sun from my eyes. Shadows moved between the trees. At first, I thought the figures could be animals, but they looked like grown men. I made out the profile of someone wearing what looked like a quiver filled with arrows on his back. He was there one moment, and in the next moment, he was gone.

Something putrid-smelling wafted toward me, and a swarm of flies entered my peripheral view. Down on the ground was the most disgusting thing I had ever seen in my life. The droppings of some large animal lay in a pile on the ground. I ducked my head into my collar and hurried away from the scent.

Not wanting to get caught out here with strange men I didn't recognize, I turned back around and headed toward my sector.

I hadn't even walked a yard when a large black bear came rushing out of nowhere.

It growled viciously and loudly and stood up on its haunches.

I screamed and backed away.

I knew that the last thing I should do was turn around and run, but how else would I escape a giant grizzly bear from attacking me?

With nothing but a canister of water and an old compass to protect me, I panicked and took off running.

The grizzly chased me, pounding the ground with the force of a dozen earthquakes.

I turned swiftly near a large boulder but tripped over the large roots of a tree. Something slashed into my back, and searing pain paralyzed me. I saw the colors red and white. I nearly blacked out from the debilitating agony.

I smelled it. The bear. It had me cornered and was now roaring in its victory.

I spun around, dragging myself across the forest floor.

Nothing I grasped in my hands could bring down a grizzly, so I knew I was just as good as dead.

I closed my eyes and curled up into a ball.

The grizzly growled one last time, and then, it yelped in pain before flopping over with a large thud right next to me.

When I opened my eyes, the grizzly was dead from an arrow straight to the brain.

Taking big gulps of air, I uncurled myself.

Large footsteps began running toward me. I instantly identified them as guards from Legance. As they pumped six bullets into the already deceased grizzly, I covered my ears and screamed.

"It's okay. We got him. Are you okay?" one of the guards asked.

"I…think…so," I panted.

Two men helped me up. I immediately wailed out in pain when the slashes on my back became agitated.

"Ow…he got you good," one guard said.

Another guard walked up to the bear and yanked out the single arrow that I believed had been the animal's cause of death. He examined it, searched around the forest with his eyes, and then dropped it to the ground.

"Come on, let's get you back home. What were you doing out here?" a guard asked.

The last thing I remembered was my knees giving out from under me and the searing pain in my back.

* * *

* * *

I came-to the next day. Or at least that's what I thought.

When I woke up, everything was fuzzy and my head hurt like hell. My left arm felt numb, and I realized I'd been sleeping on my side.

I moaned, but when I tried to roll over, I immediately felt the pain of a million needles sticking in my back.

Everything came back to me full force.

The hunters with their arrows and quivers.

The bear.

The attack.

And the guards.

I focused on the door to my room as it opened and my mother came into view.

She rushed to my bedside. "Don't move."

"Mother. It hurts."

"I know." She frowned. "How could you, Karis Chaplin? How could you go into the forest alone after I warned you not to?"

"I'm so sorry."

"You could've died," she argued.

I swallowed hard. "I know. I'm sorry."

My father came into the room. "Joella, don't be so hard on her."

"You stay out of this, Andy. She knew better than to sneak away. She knows exactly what's at risk. She could've been killed. Look at her back! It'll never be the same again. Who will want her now?"

I cringed when my mother mentioned my back. I only hoped it didn't look as bad as it felt. The pain was excruciating, but I didn't want to complain about that with my mother so angry at me.

My father knelt beside my bed and asked, "Why did you go into the forest alone?"

"I just wanted to draw the turtles by the creek. I was going to come right back. I had the compass to guide me," I said.

He shook his head. "You can't go off alone like that. Someone has to always be with you. Why didn't you just wait for me to come home?"

I frowned. "I didn't want to bother you. You were working."

"Rubbish," my mother scolded. "Never do that again, you hear me? You're officially grounded until..." She paused and bit her bottom lip.

"Until what? Just say it, mother. Until you give me away to be married, right?"

My mother grunted and sprang up from the chair beside my bed. My father went over to console her, but she shoved him away and bolted from the room.

When she left, I asked him, "My back is ugly, isn't it?"

He paused as his gaze trailed across my back. He gave me a tight-lipped smile. "No." I could tell he was lying. "The finest doctors here in Legance stitched you up. It'll heal in no time."

For almost a week, I remained on bed rest, unable to sleep the way I wanted.

What I could do was draw.

I didn't know what fascinated me about the arrow that killed the bear that attacked me, but it seemed to be the only thing I could think about from that day besides the fact that I almost died.

I spent a day and a half sketching out the arrow down to the last detail, which included key markings along with the engraved letters, OTB. I was almost finished with it when my mother came in with soup and crackers and spotted the drawing in my lap.

"What is that?" she asked, leaning in to get a better look.

"An arrow."

"Of course, it's an arrow. Why are you drawing that?"

"It's real. I've seen it. When the guards found me, the arrow was in the bear's skull. It's what killed him." I smiled and glanced up at her. "You know what, mother? I don't think the guards and I were the only ones out there that day. Someone else shot the bear. Not with guns. With this arrow. Someone else saved me."

My mother's lips parted, and she gasped. "Let me see." She took a long, hard look at the picture. Before I could protest, she ripped the page out of the notebook and tore it to shreds.

"Mother! What—"

"Never draw that again, do you hear me?" She grabbed both sides of my cheeks, squeezing them together with her thumb and forefinger. "Never again!"

I nodded.

That night I dreamt of the bear again. Its claws plunged deep into my back, ripping my body to shreds. I called out for help, and no one saved me. Not even the mysterious, shadowed men with their bows and arrows.

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Chapter Thirteen

Karis

I jerked upright, sweating and wet between the legs.

In my dreams, I had been eye to eye with the bear who hunted me, but when I woke up, I was face to face with the man who held me captive.

His darkened gray eyes swirled with something different this time. The look he cast me resembled pure lust and revelation.

My gaze trailed down to my legs, wondering what made it feel like I had wet myself. It wasn't all sweat. I was aroused. Even more humiliating was the fact that I spotted the evidence of my menstrual blood between my thighs.

My face heated, and I could have curled up into a little ball and died right then and there. I was utterly embarrassed.

I swallowed. "I…"

"You had best explain yourself," Axil commanded with a straight face.

"I didn't know this would happen. It's been months since I've had a menstrual cycle. I'm sorry I ruined your blankets. You must be so grossed out."

His expression softened. "You haven't ruined my blankets. And I'm not grossed out by something that happens naturally to a woman."

He handed me some folded cloths from a bag. I wiped my thighs and then slid the rags under me so nothing else would soil his blankets.

"I can't believe this is happening. And, of course, I don't have my things."

"It's only blood. You can use the cloths. I have more in my bag."

I chuckled, nervously. "You mean for things like this? For bloody women?"

He grinned. "No. For dressing bloody wounds."

"I'm so embarrassed," I exclaimed.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. You're menstruating, that's all. And you're an omega. Why did you hide this from me?"

“What?” I shook my head. “An omega?”

“You are human. But you’ve inherited the omega gene. You knew, but you didn’t tell me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Your slick. I can smell it. That scent is driving me crazy. You cannot hide your heat from an alpha. Not like this. You should’ve told me.”

“How can I tell you when I have no idea what you’re talking about? I’m on my period. What has that got to do with this omega thing?”

“How is this possible? Who is your father?”

“Andy. Andy Wynnell,” I replied.

“That doesn’t sound like anyone I know. One of your parents carries the gene. A prime gene.”

“If they did or do, they didn’t tell me. They were both humans.”

He massaged his chin, searching my face. “A prime blood is a human who carries an alpha or omega gene. This was how my people came to be.”

“I still don’t understand how you were modified to be the way you are,” I said.

“Scientists crossed the DNA of a human male carrying a suppressed alpha gene with a rare wolf species, altering him forever. We later found his birth name to be Augustus Maximus Primus. His first male offspring—Augustus Maximus Primus II—wasn’t born in a lab like his younger siblings, but he was the one who came back to free our mothers and fathers and grandparents from their cages after the bombs dropped. He later became our leader. The true Alpha. We called him Max Primeblood.”

“I’ve heard this story,” I told him. “Not the names. Just about how you were created in labs. Is that who your skull tattoo is of—Max Primeblood?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s how we honor him. What else have you heard about us?”

“You were supposed to become super soldiers. When the first one got away, they wanted more of you. The scientists forced the test subjects into reproducing more. There’s a rumor that they smuggled young women into the prison labs just for that purpose. You all broke free. That’s why people call you uncaged.”

“Yes. My human mother was pregnant with me when she was freed from the labs. But do you know what this means for you?” he

asked.

"I told you. I'm just a human."

"Not just a human. Somewhere in your family tree, someone carried either an alpha or omega gene. Just like Primus, both your human mother and your human father are carriers of the gene. Primus was a human Alpha before they altered him with wolf DNA. You are a human omega."

"That's impossible. My father would've said something," I exclaimed.

"He might not have known. When the genes are suppressed, many don't realize it."

"I don't think he did," I said.

"What about your mother? Did she ever tell you anything about herself?"

"No," I whispered and looked down at the ground.

"That is a lie," he replied softly.

I swallowed. "I remember once when I was little that she told me she felt like two different people stuck in the same body. She wanted to be good, but she was very unhappy. She apologized for being such a shitty mom and said she couldn't help it. We weren't that close. The only time we ever had an actual conversation was when she told me that if I was smart I'd marry Stefan Newson and never dig into my family history again."

"Did you not find that odd?"

"No. Her parents disowned her because she called off her engagement with one man to marry my father. They lost everything. Respect. Money. And their position within the sector. They hated her for it."

He leaned forward. "Why would she sign you up for the same fate?"

"You know about that?"

He nodded. "I took you because your fiancé took something from my people. He must live up to his end of the bargain if things are to go his way. Why did your mother agree to your marriage to this weasel, knowing you would never be happy with him?"

I shrugged. "Because she owed the Newson family. The man she was supposed to marry was Stefan's father. My family was one of the richest families in Anchora. You might not know this, but the sectors are controlled by councils made up of the heads of prominent houses just as much as the governor controls them. A

union between the Newson and Chaplin houses would've been very favorable."

He nodded. "I've come to understand that now."

"My mother's father was the judge, and Stefan's father dealt with trades within and outside of the sector. When they threatened to lock my mother up for being a loose woman, she told them she was pregnant and that if they forgave her, she would promise her unborn baby girl to be married to the eldest son. They agreed, but with stipulations."

"What stipulations?" he asked.

I sighed. "Many. Although, the majority of these stipulations weren't in favor or my mother or her family. Soon after that, the Chaplin house became obsolete and Stefan's father took everything my grandfather owned. My mother just wanted to be free. I was her last resort. After that, she fled from Anchora to Legance where she legally married my father, Andy."

"You said your mother was dead just the other day. How did it happen?"

"She jumped..." My voice cracked, and I said no more.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me for asking, but why would you agree to this after her death?" Axil asked.

"I don't want to repeat history. I don't want to be like my mother. The things they say about her..." I shook my head. "That's not me. I'm not my mother." I covered my mouth with my palm, wondering if I'd said too much. When I looked up at Axil again, remorse riddled his face.

He leaned in and scooped me up from the ground. Before I knew it, he had me cradled in his arms and was carrying me outside.

"What are you doing?"

"There is a hot spring nearby. The others will wake up soon wanting to bathe, but you'll get first dibs," he said.

"What did Stefan take?" I asked as he carried me through the fields in the dewy hours of the morning.

"You will know soon. But first, the bath," he said.

"Earlier you mentioned my scent. Do I smell bad? Is that why you're taking me to have a bath?"

He chuckled softly. "No, omega. You smell like heaven, I think. I think it's how heaven would smell if I'm ever lucky enough to go there."

I giggled, but on a serious note, I had many questions about my

situation. “What is going to happen to me?”

“I’ll take you to my village.”

“I know that, but what does my being a human omega mean?” I asked.

“You are an unclaimed and unbonded omega, so I imagine the other Alphas would fight like dogs to have at you,” he said.

“Really? I don’t want anyone to get hurt because of me.”

“No one in my clan is afraid of getting hurt or dying. Our destinies are already sealed. And don’t worry, little one. I’d fight like a dog, even to the death, to keep you safe.”

I exhaled and relaxed against his chest.

For the first time in my life, I felt no need to worry.

But I wasn’t worrying about me, I was worrying about others and what might happen to them whether Axil’s mission was successful or not.

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Chapter Fourteen

Axil

She felt right in my arms, like she was meant to be there.

I kicked off my boots and carried her out into the heated waters. Steam billowed up around us, and the first rays of the morning broke through the clouds.

The moment she slipped from my arms and into the waters, a look of euphoria passed over her face.

“It feels so good.” She drummed her fingers across the surface of the water and walked deeper into the hot springs. The ends of her hair were submerged in the water. She didn’t tie up her hair this time.

She was in heat, indeed, and I already knew that no amount of baths would wash away the scent of her rise. The aroma had been there since day one. I should have known before.

After her menses, she would go through another rise. In just a few days, she’d be so fertile that every Alpha within a mile radius would be able to scent her. Her womb would be ready to take an Alpha’s seed. The only thing that would satisfy her lust was the knot of an Alpha locked deep inside her.

She peeked over her shoulder at me. “Are you going to watch me wash myself?”

“Yes,” I growled.

She sunk neck-deep into the springs, cupped some water into her palms, and let it pour over her face. Her long eyelashes clumped together and her lips were wet. Her little pink tongue parted through her lips as she licked them.

My cock stiffened in my pants. My knot tightened, ready for some type of relief.

She glanced down between my legs and bit her bottom lip.

All I could think about was claiming her right there in the hot springs so no other Alpha would ever get the chance to know she was an omega in heat.

“It’s happened before,” she mumbled.

“What has happened before?”

She blushed. “Whatever this is. The first time was a year ago. Right after my seventeenth birthday. It happened about three times that year, maybe four. I told my friend Cai about it once, and she told me it was just cramps and laughed and gave me really strong pain meds. I took the meds, and they helped me sleep through the phase. I might have slept half the day.” She giggled. “When it started happening again, I asked her for more meds, but she said she didn’t have any. Her boyfriend would have to steal more if I needed them. I didn’t want to get anyone in trouble, so I just called out from work and took a lot of cold showers until whatever this is that’s happening to me stopped.”

“It’s called a heat.”

“I’m in heat? You mean like an animal?”

“You’re an omega, Karis. Of a different kind. *One of a kind.* But you’re not an animal. Your heat will continue to rise until…”

“Until what?”

“Until it’s over or until you’re knotted.”

Her gaze dropped to my growing erection, and right then, I knew she had figured out what I was talking about. I didn’t even have to tell her. Her omega instincts had already figured out exactly what she craved.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

“No, Alphas and omegas are made for each other. If you ride it out, it’s irritating and nearly unbearable, as you have experienced before. When an Alpha knots an omega, this soothes her during her heat. Knotting eases the pain, and it also renders ultimate pleasure to both of them. Only an Alpha can please an omega thoroughly. She will never be fully satisfied with any other. She will never know peace until she bonds with one. It goes both ways. An Alpha will fight to claim an omega because he knows she is the only one that can fulfill him. The period of need doesn’t end with the omega’s heat or the alpha’s rut. If the mate-bond is strong, they mate for life. A mating session between an Alpha and his omega creates an aphrodisiac, which is addicting to both. Breeding is for life. And sex becomes just as vital as breathing.”

“But I’m not a whore.”

I frowned. “No. You’re not. This is natural. It has nothing to do with being a whore. Has someone told you otherwise?”

“My mother…” She started, and then she shook her head.

“What did your mother tell you?”

“She told me to keep my legs closed until Stefan came to get me, or they’d kill me for being loose. She said my virtue would be the only thing that saved me from a life of misery. She didn’t want me to become like her…and I believed her.”

“You were misled,” I said.

Her eyes widened, and she covered her parted lips. “Do you think my mother was like me? An omega?”

“Yes. She was no Alpha if she allowed others to control her life. She was likely a human omega like you.”

“Then she suffered alone and in silence.”

“But now she is free.”

“It’s so strange. She said she felt incomplete, like she was missing something. Father did everything to make her happy, but she was always so bitter. She was an omega, and she didn’t even know it.” She sighed. “I wasn’t the only woman you took from Legance. I saw a girl about my age with the man you called Titus.”

“Titus took the girl on his own. We only came for you.”

“Titus is an Alpha?”

I nodded.

“Then that girl is an omega.”

“I don’t know, but it’s highly likely. She could just be a common human whose scent has sent Titus into a rut. We won’t know anytime soon. If she is, he will knot her a dozen times over until she’s been thoroughly claimed from the inside out. No other Alpha would ever stand a chance.”

“There must be more of me, then. Somewhere out there. Maybe even in Legance,” she offered.

“Omegas are rare. But human omegas…even rarer. Many humans who carry the gene have suppressed their true nature either knowingly or unknowingly,” I offered.

“I felt something different about myself last year. I knew something was up with me, but I didn’t want to go to the nurse for every little ailment,” she said.

“We present between the ages of twelve and twenty-one. Primes usually present earlier unless something has suppressed their true urges. Maybe you were presenting then.”

“It’s funny, because now that I’ve just turned eighteen, I feel it again. Like something’s changing.”

“Just turned?”

“You kidnapped me on my birthday. It’s why I was having a

drink. I was supposed to have cake, but I left it on the kitchen table because it was raining. Who wants soggy cake?" She smiled and giggled. "They're probably searching high and low, in the forest and out, for me by now. They probably think I ran away."

"Soon, they will know who took you. I will make it known."

"They will not be happy," she said.

"I know. You are very valuable. Very, very valuable." As I made the declaration, I realized just how special she was. "Happy Birthday."

"Thanks." She turned around, picked up the ends of her hair, and wrung her strands dry.

I closed the distance between us and pressed my fingers to the top portion of the scars running across her back. She stiffened and then sighed. Under my fingertips, the surface of her skin vibrated, sending electrifying pulses through my arm.

"Who did this?" I demanded.

"A bear."

I growled. "And who let the bear do this?" I pressed my lips together, trying to rein in my anger.

"It was my fault. It happened when I was thirteen. I went out into the forest. I was in the bear's domain. It chased after me and I couldn't outrun it. It knocked me down and clawed my back. This scar is my punishment for not listening to my mother. She warned me that if I tried to escape again, I'd never survive out on my own, but I wasn't trying to escape that time. I just wanted a little freedom. Now I have an ugly scar."

"It is not ugly. What does not kill you makes you stronger. You wear the mark of the beast. It should be a reminder that you can survive anything."

She turned around and lifted her gaze to meet mine.

"Is it true that Alphas like you go hunting for women when you're in a rut," she asked.

I nodded.

"They say Alphas have raped many women out in the forests. Is that true?"

I swallowed my shame. "I won't deny this. I don't rape. It's not in my nature. But I won't pretend that there are Alphas who believe they're entitled to anything and will do anything to get it. Just like good humans and bad humans, there are good Alphas and bad Alphas."

“Are you good?” she whispered.

I must have taken a long time to answer that, because she dismissed the question by asking another.

“When the other Alphas in your village find out about me, how will I be able to protect myself?”

I cupped her chin and stroked her bottom lip gently with my thumb. “You won’t have to worry about protection. I’ll provide it without question. As for your sweet slick, I’ll mask the scent for you, but you should stay close and do as I say.”

She nodded.

I would protect her from other Alphas, but could I protect her from me?

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Chapter Fifteen

Karis

I had no idea a week ago that my path would lead me here. Into Axil's village.

The path was semi-paved with a mix of rocks and pebbles, not asphalt. No gates or fences closed the residents in. No armed, uniformed guards patrolled the streets or sidewalks. It was all one big open space that stretched dozens of miles.

All I could see were shops and houses. Men and women walked about freely. Children played as if they were oblivious to property boundaries. Or perhaps, there were no boundaries. I smelled fresh open water and non-polluted breeze. In Legance, about fifty percent of the trees were cut down to make space for more residents, but here in Mistacre, I spotted trees that could've been five times as old as I was.

I'd never lived outside of Legance, so I looked in awe at everything and everyone, wondering if this was all a dream. It wasn't. I'd been lied to my whole life. By everyone.

"Welcome to Mistacre," Axil said.

"I wasn't expecting this," I said. "Your home is beautiful."

Just under an hour ago, we'd traveled through a city of ruins to get here. No one had settled there in decades. Buildings were crumbled to the ground, and old cars were left rusting out in the street. Almost every house and retail shop had been looted and picked over well before the bombs dropped. The city represented most of what the United States looked like currently—a framework of what once was. But Axil's people did not live among the ruins as I thought.

When we arrived in Mistacre, I was pleasantly surprised by the change in scenery. This wasn't how I envisioned a place where uncaged savages lived. But I'd been corrected before. They might have been uncaged, but they certainly weren't savages. Our teachers had lied to us and told us that everything outside of the sector was in shambles and a living hell.

Mistacre was far from a living hell. Nothing I'd seen so far was

in shambles. Everything looked like a paradise where people roamed freely without being confined behind walls. If anyone asked me, I'd rather be uncaged and thought of as a savage than caged up and lied to.

According to Axil, an adjoining village—Northgarde—was also home to his people. Mistacre was the main village, and Northgarde was just north of here.

We must've entered the busiest side of the village. Residents roamed about. Groups of children ran around and chased each other. In the distance, the faint hum of a windmill faded in and out. The shelters were a mix of huts, cabins, and bungalows. I even spotted several tree houses higher near the hillside. There was a body of water nearby. I could smell and hear it.

Everyone was dressed similarly. Clothing comprised of animal skin and fur, but there were modern garments too, like blue jeans and t-shirts. Most women wore long tunic dresses and boots, while others were dressed similar to the men in their pants and fitted vests.

I wasn't the only one who stared.

When residents realized that Axil and his group were back from their mission and had brought two strangers with them, people glared.

Six men standing outside of what looked like a workshop stopped what they were doing to look. Two women, both holding a basket of fresh produce, stopped in the middle of the path to give me a thorough once over from head to toe. One woman frowned, and the other just carried a blank expression on her face. Others whispered behind their hands and pointed. A little girl with her hair ribbons undone and flowing loosely with her tresses ran up to peer at me.

I smiled. "Hi."

She ran off without a word.

"Happens every time we have newcomers. Don't worry about it too much. No one will bother you."

"Do they know why I'm here?" I asked.

"Some of them do," he replied.

"So they already hate me."

"You did nothing wrong. No one here has a reason to hate you."

Before I could respond, a huge hulking man almost as tall as Axil crossed our paths. The two men greeted each other with a nod.

“Xenon, you’re back already,” Axil exclaimed, smiling.

Xenon grinned. “Yes, brother, and I can see you brought back what you said you would.” He gave me a suspicious once-over, cocking his head to the side.

I was grateful that I was still wrapped up in Axil’s overcoat. I felt naked with the way this guy Xenon looked at me. The same dominance that surrounded Axil rolled off Xenon in waves. I knew without a doubt that Xenon was an Alpha.

“She looks too good for Stefan the Weasel,” Xenon exclaimed.

So Stefan had a nickname. *The weasel.*

I looked down at the ground and stood back behind Axil.

“Even so, she must not be touched. I will keep her with me,” Axil said firmly.

“No ropes or chains?” Xenon asked. “You trust her that much?”

“She’s my responsibility, and she will not escape,” Axil growled.

Xenon held both hands up in what I took as a gesture of submission or agreement. “Ah, finders keepers, losers weepers. You are entitled to the spoils of your raid, brother.”

“It was hardly a raid. It was too easy for us.” Axil nudged the guy in the gut. “What about you? You left after I did, and you’re back already. Where is your loot?”

Xenon laughed. “I hit the mother-load, brother. What did you think? That I was getting rusty?”

Axil laughed. “I must see this.”

Xenon frowned as his gaze drifted from me to Titus and the other girl as they veered off down a wooded trail. Everyone else also stared at their retreating backs.

“Who is that human with Titus?” Xenon asked.

“I don’t know. He keeps her all to himself. He’s marked her. I’ve washed my hands of it. I have other things to worry about.”

Xenon nibbled his bottom lip. “You think she’s one?”

“I don’t know,” Axil said. “But we need to talk.”

“Yeah, we do. You sent that thing yet?” Xenon asked.

Axil nodded. “A couple of days ago. Deadline’s tomorrow.”

“Then only a matter of time,” Xenon stated.

They were talking in code with me standing right there. I had a feeling that most of their discussion was about me and the situation with Stefan. Afraid that if I spoke, Xenon might discover I was an omega, I kept quiet. But the way his gaze kept shifting from Axil to me told me he sensed something was amiss.

Axil started walking again. I stayed close, and Xenon kept up to the left of him. The chain-linked belts of both Alphas clanked as they walked, reminding me they were descendants of dangerous convicts and skilled hunters with enhanced capabilities and unique physiology. Even the residents of Mistacre parted out of the way as they walked through the village.

"Have you heard from Echo?" Axil asked.

"He's still out of pocket. Last we heard, he was on board with your plan. He trusts you completely."

Axil grunted. "Then he should have trusted me many months ago when I told him that Stefan was a lying weasel who would never follow through. He played us."

"Echo will kill that bastard for this when he gets back."

"He can if he wants. That's his prerogative. An ax to the neck won't solve this, or I would've done it already. Echo left me in charge, and I took men out to work in those shitty conditions day after day. And then that weasel fucked us over. He thinks guns will stop us forever. He made this deal, and now, he has to follow through with it. I promised him hell until he does. There will be no peace for him in the meantime. If he didn't want to deal with us, then he should've never gotten us involved. I only wished I was there to see the look on his face when he realized I knew the whereabouts of the one he wants the most."

Xenon laughed. "Or the look on his face when he learns that we have her."

I swallowed as heat rose up my neck while they were talking about me.

I'd always heard rumors about Stefan bragging about his upcoming marriage to me. He talked of me as if I were a prize. I'd never forget the day Cai's boyfriend called me Stefan's little virgin bride as if I were some object or temporary obsession.

Feeling a little warm, I shifted inside Axil's fur coat.

Xenon stopped in his tracks and lifted his nose in my general direction. "Brother, do you smell that?"

"No, I smell nothing."

"Are you sure? She smells fertile like—" Xenon started.

"Yes, I'm sure. Your nose is playing tricks on you, or maybe you need to get laid," Axil joked, stopping in front of a bungalow that sat near the forest line with an unobstructed view of a lake. The sun was already going down, and fireflies danced above the water's

surface.

“If you say so,” Xenon laughed. “I’ll catch up with you tomorrow at daybreak. We should hear from our scout by then, yes?”

“Yes, or we’ll go to Plan B,” Axil agreed.

Once Xenon was out of earshot, Axil turned his attention to me. “If we don’t get your heat in check, there’s going to be a problem. He’s not the only Alpha that can smell your rise, omega. And this is only the beginning of your heat.”

“I told you. Besides a cold shower, I don’t know how to stop it. I’ve never been around Alphas. At least, I don’t think so.”

“It’s not your fault. I didn’t know you were an omega. That complicates a lot of things. I’ll figure something out, but let’s get you inside. You need some rest and food in you.”

He was right. I was a little weak, and my menstrual cycles weren’t always a walk in the park. They usually lasted only a day or so but stripped most of my energy.

“Okay.” I nodded. “Was that your brother?”

“Not by blood. We grew up together, but he’s like a brother to me.”

“Are you their Alpha?”

He chuckled. “It doesn’t quite work like that, little one. We’re not a pack of wolves. Every Alpha in our clan shares the responsibility of keeping the others safe and in check. Other than that, clan members are free to leave if they like. There’s always an Alpha-in-Charge. That responsibility passed to me when Echo left to take care of some business in Gaia. He will be back soon, but seeing how this situation would affect us before he returns, I needed to decide. Thus, it’s why you’re here.”

The next thing that came out of my mouth surprised me just as much as it surprised him.

“I’m here because I didn’t try to stop you. I should be afraid for my life. So, why aren’t I?”

Axil narrowed his gaze with his head cocked slightly to one side. I waited for the answer as he studied me with a soul-drenching gaze. He was so compelling, his demeanor so magnetizing.

“You know the answer to that,” he said calmly.

“I do?”

“You are Omega. I am Alpha. We’re drawn to each other like magnets.”

“It does feel that way for me. And for you…?”

“The only thing stopping me from taking advantage of you is my self-control over my urges. This takes years of practice, and it’s a virtue not all Alphas have. But truthfully, my patience is fading. *Inside.*” He pointed to his front door.

When I passed him on the way inside, his husky scent enveloped me. He had awakened something, something deep inside me.

And speaking of differences…he had years of practice controlling his urges, but my years were spent without learning this virtue.

I needed something or someone specific. I needed an Alpha. And now I understood why.

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Chapter Sixteen

Karis

Every second with Axil was leading me closer to answers. And even if I didn't have every question resolved yet, I knew I'd eventually understand the meaning of all this.

Axil kicked off his boots in the foyer and propped them up against the wall once we were locked inside his house. He switched on an oil lamp by the door and dumped our belongings into a chair.

The home smelled of him. Of cinnamon and chestnuts. There was a cold draft dancing around my ankles. A window by the door was open and Axil shut it.

I slipped out of his overcoat and handed it to him.

"Tell me now. About what all of this is about. I want to know all of the truth, no matter how strange it might be. How did you know where to find me? How did you know I was the one?" I urged.

Now that I knew a little, I wanted to know more. Questions swam in my head. They wouldn't stop until I had answers. Not just about my urges or my omega gene, but about the history behind my kidnapping.

"We have our sources," he replied.

"Sources? As in, on the inside? A citizen of Legance?"

He nodded once.

"What has Stefan done?" I asked.

He went over to the fireplace and threw four logs inside and then fidgeted with a fire starter. As he poked around in the fire, he spoke, "He came to us months back asking if we could lend him the manpower to drill for oil and then raise some tanks to store it. The deal was that once we got the operation running that we'd share the supply. The tanks are right on the border of Mistacre and Anchora, so Echo agreed, even though I advised him not to. Stefan reneged on the deal and set up guards with sniper rifles to take us down. Just last month, a sniper shot at and injured an Alpha and three others to keep us away. The tanks aren't something we can just pick up and take away as we normally do when we want something," he explained.

It disgusted me how anyone could ask someone to work and offer fair compensation and then strip away the very thing they worked so hard to get.

“Why would he do that? What would he gain from keeping you from the oil you helped to drill?”

“Maybe he had no intentions of sharing the resources with us. Winter will be here soon, and our people need fuel. We shifted the manpower from our oil sources to these new tanks, and we simply don’t have time to make up for the months we lost while working with Stefan. We can try to weather it out, but things will be rough this winter, and I don’t want anyone suffering needlessly. We’ve survived freezing temperatures before, but this isn’t just about the cold. Like other sectors, we aren’t completely self-sufficient. We need it for things we manufacture here for our use, and we especially need to it keep our water safe to drink. We trade for what we don’t have. Not so much for crops we can’t produce, but for medical supplies. Things like that. We can trade oil for top dollar these days, seeing as how few villages have the manpower to drill.”

“Who do you trade with?” I asked, thinking of how Legance had trade deals with other sectors.

“Mostly trusted tribes in Gaia and Providencia. We sometimes travel further south to Ocane in the dead of winter to buy steel and iron in exchange for wool and furs.”

“And there is not enough oil to last a whole winter?”

He shook his head. “Highly unlikely. Supplies were already dwindling at the first extraction site, and we’ve suffered for it. We only have so much land that belongs to us here, and we’re not leaving it. Believe it or not, we prefer not to have to plunder innocent villages to survive. Twenty years ago, that would’ve been our way. Not today. I’m sure you’ve caught wind of our reputation…as savages.”

“But I know more now. Everyone’s just trying to survive,” I replied. “Do you really think Stefan will follow through with his promise if you give me back? Why did you think that taking me would solve all this?”

He paused. “I overheard Stefan talking about you one day when we were at the tank site. He said he’d been waiting for you since he was twelve. In the name of his dead father, he swore he’d impregnate you within a week of consummation. It’s what your mother promised. A fertile heir.”

I bit into my bottom lip and then said, “It’s what my mother was supposed to give his father.”

“There is a fertility problem in your sector, yes?”

I nodded.

“Among the men?” he asked.

“And the women, too. But mostly the women. When the women are deemed fertile and the family is poor with no say or power, they have to register their status. There is punishment, banishment, or jail time if they don’t. I’ve heard that the tests can be manipulated. There are women who have hidden their status until eventually they get pregnant anyway. If things go as the governor and governor’s council wants it, the fertile girl is then paired with someone, and when they come of age, they must marry. Either that, or they’re traded to another sector in exchange for more fertile women or something else of value. If they break the agreement, they must give up the name of the man who they had sex with. Consequences can be as cruel as death or banishment, for one or both. But, one way or the other, the governor and council are sure to make an example of bad actors.”

“Like they would’ve done to your mother,” he offered.

I swallowed. “Right. Like that.”

“And your mother, facing an undesirable fate and already deemed fertile, gave you away before you were born,” he concluded.

I nodded. “Yes…my mother made a sacrifice. My situation is different, I think.”

“Yes, this is different.” He gave me a troubling stare. “As you’re aware, I can detect if and when a female is fertile by her smell. How do your people detect fertility?”

“Blood and hormone tests in the mother, and then in the baby at birth, and then at the onset of puberty.”

He scratched his chin. “One would think that if they are capable of such tests, then they are capable of solving their infertility issues by now, don’t you think?”

“Honestly, I don’t think that’s the goal. No one’s ever explained it to me, but I don’t think that an overpopulated sector has ever been the goal.”

He grinned. “You are smart.”

“Just observant. And I’ve had a lot of time to think.” I frowned. “Tell me…what else did Stefan say about our betrothal?”

“Apparently, he knows what he wants to do to you and he describes it in great detail, but I won’t repeat that stuff. And he said he’s been…practicing.”

“Practicing?”

“It’s what he says. Apparently, he has no shortage of young women to take to his bed. He thinks with his dick,” Axil stated. “I’m sorry you have to find out like this.”

“I already knew.”

“You knew?”

I nodded. “I’m not a complete hermit. I’ve heard that he’s promiscuous. He’s just like the majority of men I know.”

Axil raised an eyebrow. “You know plenty of jerks, then?”

My face heated in embarrassment. “I guess.”

“Why would you stay? Your mother made this bed for you, but she is no longer here. Why would you not run?”

I shook my head. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Help me understand.”

“She owes more than just Stefan’s family. She practically sold me twice over. Once to the Newson family for Stefan, and then again to the governor. She racked up so much debt because she refused to work and earn her share. When she died and they banished my father, I became an orphan. My uncle threatened to pull the rug out from under Stefan, but he came back to make known that he still had a claim over me, and he paid again to keep the agreement valid. He knows that I’m fertile and that I come from a line of fertile women. If I renege like my mother did, I will never live peacefully. They wouldn’t allow it. And just like my mother, my mistakes would follow me off the end of a cliff somewhere.”

I stopped when my voice cracked and looked away. I had cried many nights about this same fate, but I wouldn’t let Axil see me breaking down in front of him.

I sighed. “So, you see, I’m already doomed. I think I’ll feel better knowing that you’ll have the oil supply for your clan in exchange for something that was already bound to happen—my marriage to Stefan. I never had a choice in this. And quite frankly, the consummation has been delayed many times before, but I already know where this road leads me.”

Light from the moon filtered inside the bungalow and fanned over us like a spotlight. Axil looked conflicted. His gray eyes clouded over like a storm. He closed the distance between us. When

he touched my cheek with his rough, calloused fingers, I pressed my face against his palm.

His lips parted as if he wanted to say something, but he just stared. He looked remorseful.

“I am sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I whispered. “I know what’s at stake.”

Axil took a deep breath and then closed his eyes. He pressed the bridge of his nose against my forehead and inhaled deeply. After a strangled growl of aggravation, he parted swiftly from me and backed up toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked as he tugged on his boots and opened the door.

“Stay inside.”

“But—”

He was gone before I could finish.

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Chapter Seventeen

Axil

I couldn't control myself anymore.

With an erection the size of a mountain and as aggressive as a freight train, I pushed myself out of the house.

My Alpha instincts told me that standing on the other side of that door in my home was an omega who was completely and utterly compatible with me. Why else would I feel his way? Why else would I feel the need to bond with her? Hell, it felt like I was already bonding with her.

In the midst of all this, and even after understanding that Karis had been forced for years by the men in her life, all I could think about was claiming her myself. Was I no better? Were staking my claim and satisfying my cravings worth more than respecting her right to choose?

The last thing I wanted Karis to do was get scared and try to run off. I had made a mistake, and now I'd have to choose, but my heart had already chosen for me.

I wanted to protect her from her cruel fate.

I wanted to protect her from myself.

And as a human omega who was sending all my senses into serious overdrive, I wanted to claim her like only an Alpha could.

I marched down the path, but I didn't go far. I made it to the edge of the forest before I growled out in frustration. Soon, my people would know she was an omega.

Kidnapping her was my first mistake.

Bringing her into my village to dozens of other Alphas who would realize her worth was the second mistake.

I'd seen the way the others looked at her as we reached my home. I had joked about it earlier with Xenon, but our noses did not play tricks on us. Once we detected the sweet fragrance of an unclaimed omega's slick, there was nothing we could do to stop ourselves from going into rut. It was like throwing a juicy bone to a starving dog. In our clan, you either claimed a fertile omega or let her go. You did not leave her to roam freely during her rise, sending

dozens of hungry, unmated Alphas into rut.

Once an unclaimed omega revealed herself, the majority of unmated Alphas would do what they'd been doing for years—isolate themselves, leave the village, or go hunting instead. Anything to keep their mind off fucking until the urge left their system. On the other hand, other Alphas without mates would stop at nothing to hunt an omega if the scent appealed to them.

And this would go on and on...

If Karis stayed here among Alphas, it wouldn't be long before she was claimed.

Her body would crave it, and she would soon learn that the only way to satisfy her needs and soothe her while she was in heat was from the knot of an Alpha.

What was I to do? Sending her back to the human men who would only use and abuse her like they did her mother wasn't an option. I couldn't let her go through with it. She was an omega; it was in her nature to submit to the higher authority figures in her life. In the past, she had no one to stand up for her. Not her mother. And not her own father. She'd never had the protection of an Alpha.

But she did now.

Keeping her close to me was the only option. But giving her back was the key to regaining the resources that were stolen from us.

I wanted to fuck her and protect her at the same time.

She was so innocent, giving me her trust because yielding to an Alpha was second nature to her.

She didn't understand any of this.

She didn't understand her worth.

I dropped my head in my palms and ran my hands down my face.

I needed strength because I would have to make the most challenging, most selfless decision in my life.

* * *

* * *

She wasn't where I left her when I got back inside.

She could've slipped out against my warning, but I somehow hoped she hadn't done that. Even if she knew the dangers of being an unbonded omega running around lost in my village, I certainly hoped she wasn't so fearful of me that she would consider running without protection.

Subtle noises led me to the only bathroom in the house. I knocked on the door.

"Karis?"

"I'm in here."

I exhaled.

Afraid she'd gotten sick, I pushed the door open. My gaze immediately dropped to her clothes in a pile on the floor and then trailed up to the tub where she was submerged chest-deep in water.

She blushed and submerged herself a little deeper. "I...hope you don't mind."

"It's okay." I grabbed a towel from the linen closet before going to assist her. When I realized she was shivering, I stuck my fingers in the water. "Karis, it's cold! Did you try to turn on the hot water?"

She smiled meekly. "It's cold on purpose. I told you. It helps. Remember?"

I sighed, shaking my head, and then I reached down and scooped her out of the water. With my free hand, I wrapped her up in the towel and carried her to my bed.

"You're so warm," she whispered, snuggling her face against my chest. "And you smell so good." She wrapped her fingers around the back of my neck, refusing to let go. "Please don't leave me."

"Karis, you don't understand..." I wanted to tell her she had unknowingly led me into my rut. I didn't know how long I could hold off without devouring her non-stop.

"I *do* understand. I know you won't hurt me. When you touch me, it feels better. Remember? Like you did in the tent..." Her voice trailed off.

I caved and settled down on the bed with her. She threaded her fingers with mine, pulled my arm across her waist, and then snuggled back against me.

My cock was rock hard against her soft, bare ass. *And she knew it.*

I bit hard into my bottom lip.

She stopped shivering soon after. The even rhythm of her

breathing told me she had fallen asleep. I pulled the wool over our bodies and buried my nose against her nape.

Knowing she couldn't hear a thing, I whispered, "I can never leave you, Karis. For your sake, you should leave me."

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Chapter Eighteen

Karis

I had this odd feeling that Axil had gone as I roused from my sleep the next morning.

I woke up naked on the bed beneath a wool blanket that smelled of him. I groaned and lifted the cover with me as I rose. The curtains were open. It was broad daylight outside.

My menstrual cramps were gone entirely. Thank God for my short cycles. And the heat Axil claimed I was going through...well, I didn't feel any of it. But it seemed to come in waves.

Yawning, I got up and looked around for my clothes. Something was going to have to give, because I wasn't going to walk around naked all day. I exited the bedroom, eager to find Axil.

On the way, I traded the blanket for an overcoat and used a leather belt hanging by the door to cinch the waist in a bit.

"Axil? Are you here?" I called out.

The bungalow was small, maybe a total of twelve hundred square feet of interior space. Aside from the bathroom and another small room, a main room housed the kitchen, dining, and living areas. It was all one ample, very cozy, open space. I was used to small living areas. I'd been living in a small ranch home since the day I was born. I never sought to move, not even when my uncle offered me to move into the in-laws' units behind their mansion.

Something scraped on the floorboards outside. Someone was on the porch, dragging something.

I followed the noise source and almost jumped from my skin when I came eye-to-eye with a tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed young woman.

"Who are you?" I gasped.

"I'm the maid," she exclaimed with a cheeky smile.

"Oh..."

"Just kidding. I'm Axil's cousin. Sorex." She extended her hand while giving me the once over.

"Hi, Sorex," I said, shaking her hand in greeting. "I'm Karis."

"I know who you are." She plopped down in a wooden chair,

propped both her feet high up on the railing, and began wrapping a leather strip around a broken arrow.

"Where's Axil?" I looked behind me, wondering if I missed him inside.

"He'll be back. Mr. AIC had things to do."

"AIC?" I frowned.

"Alpha-in-Charge. Hey, don't worry. He left me to look out for you."

This time, it was my turn to give her the once over. She didn't look that much older than I was, and she certainly wasn't older than Axil. She wore skin-tight, brown leather pants and a matching fitted vest. Like the men, she had a chain-linked belt. A chain anklet adorned her left boot.

She reached over, dragged another wooden chair beside her, and patted the seat. "Sit."

I took the seat and watched as she finished wrapping the arrow. The initials OTB were carved into the arrow. "What does OTB mean?" I asked.

"Of the blood."

"Makes sense."

Without warning, she grabbed a bow and shot an arrow into a target board nailed to a tree.

My heart marched in my chest.

"You're jumpy, omega. Don't be afraid." She laughed.

"Wait a minute! *You know?*"

"Axil tells me everything," she exclaimed proudly.

"Are you an—?"

"Nah," she said before I could finish. "Never. No one will ever mark me, and I'm too damn lazy to be an Alpha. I presented as a beta long ago. My gender suits me fine." She drew another arrow and hit the target in the center.

"You're good. Do all the women in Mistacre practice archery?"

"Nah, some are too girly. They'd rather hide behind their Alphas." She shrugged.

Heat crept up my neck when I recalled I had done just that the other day.

"Not that anything's wrong with that. Just not my style. Not my style at all. I'm not girlie." She shook her head. "So, Karis of Legance, what do you do in that dreadful place?"

"I ah...I draw and paint."

“Really? Cool. We have artists here, too. Most apply their ink to skin, not to paper.”

My eyes drifted across the many inkings on her arm. Just like Axil, tattoos covered her exposed skin. Sorex was beautiful, but what I found appealing the most about her was that she seemed confident with herself.

“May I?” I asked, pointing to one of the arrows.

“Sure, just don’t hurt yourself.”

“I won’t. I’m not a girly girl, either.” I grinned.

And just like that, I forgot my fears for a little while.

It didn’t take long for us to end up in the yard closer to the target board as Sorex taught me how to hold the bow and the arrow.

Neither of us expected a seven-foot-tall, savage-looking man to lurk out from the forest.

“Stand down, beta,” the man called out.

I didn’t even notice, but Sorex had an arrow pointed right at the man.

“Take another step, and you’ll regret it,” Sorex warned.

He didn’t take heed to her warning, coming closer and sniffing the air. “This isn’t about you, beta.” He pulled off his hood and pointed at me. “Tell the omega to walk this way.”

“Detroit, is that you? Stay back!” An arrow pierced the ground near Detroit’s foot.

Detroit growled and lurched forward.

“I warned you,” Sorex growled back.

“You have no use for this omega. Your tongue will not satisfy her need. Neither will your fake dicks.”

“How about I shoot your dick off and we’ll be even?” she shot back.

“You can try.”

An arrow flew past the man’s face, missing his ear by a fraction. Fresh blood seeped from a small slit on his right cheek.

“You bitch of a dog,” he spat.

Not three seconds later, his leg buckled out from under him when an arrow pierced his thigh. He cursed up a storm, breaking the arrow in half and chucking it aside.

Sorex laughed. “Leave, or I’ll put another one in your ass, Detroit.”

A familiar growl erupted behind me. Without hesitation, I knew

who had arrived.

“What the fuck!” Axil barged in and went straight for Detroit. He wrapped his fingers around the man’s throat and threw him nearly two dozen feet across the lawn.

“I came for the omega!” Detroit growled, jumping up from the ground.

Axil squared his shoulders. “And you’ll leave without her. She belongs to me.”

“Bullshit. She’s unclaimed by any Alpha. Not even you. I can smell her slick clear across the valley. I was working that post right over there.” He pointed up in the trees. “I couldn’t even work in peace. All I could smell was her heat.”

“Leave, Detroit. Or you’ll find yourself exiled again. This time for good,” Axil demanded. “Off my turf, now. Return to yours.”

“You’d best run along now,” Sorex told him.

“Oh, you shut up! Your day will come. I’m surprised nobody has tamed you yet. Let me catch you hunting in my zone again. I’ll bend you over and fuck you sideways, beta bitch.”

“That’s what they all say,” was Sorex’s reply as Detroit walked off.

“Thank you, Sorex,” Axil said.

“No problem. It’s what I came for. You told me to shoot any trespassers in the foot, and that’s what I did.”

“But you shot him in the leg,” Axil exclaimed.

She pursed her lips and put her hands on her hips. “Same difference. The bastard can barely walk now.” She picked up her quiver and tossed it over her shoulder. “See you later.”

“Come back tomorrow,” Axil called out behind her.

Sorex held up a peace sign and took the trail leading back through the front yard.

Axil’s hand sliding against the nape of my neck was the most soothing thing I’d felt all morning. I would’ve probably melted straight to the ground if he wasn’t there, holding me steady. I felt this blinding urge to drop to my knees and demand he make this needful ache go away. Instead, I pressed my face to the front of his chest and exhaled deeply, knowing his scent would soothe me. There was something about his touch and his smell that comforted me even in stressful times. I needed him so much. I just didn’t know how to tell him.

“I have some news for you...and something else I think you

might like," he said.

"I'm not sure about the news, but is the something else clothes by any chance?"

He chuckled, then shook his head.

"Food?"

"Is that what human women think about these days. Food and clothes?"

I nodded. "Mmm, most of the time."

"How about I feed you first, and then we can talk?"

"I think you've been trying to fatten me up."

He winked. "This is true. Winter is coming."

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Chapter Nineteen

Axil

"Axil, that was so good," Karis exclaimed, sipping from her glass of water.

We had just eaten dinner—grilled trout and twice-baked potatoes. I thought she would complain about my less-than-stellar cooking skills, but come to think of it, I'd hardly heard Karis complain about anything at all. Except when she first realized I'd swooped in and taken her from a fate she expected to play out.

It would never happen. No, I wasn't going to let that shit happen.

It was past time for me to tell her what my plans were.

I smiled. "Better than the unseasoned rabbit stew we had on the way here."

I giggled. "Yes, better than that."

"Don't worry. You won't have to ever eat rabbit again."

She frowned, put the glass down, and looked up at me questionably.

"What? You'd like more rabbit?"

She chuckled. "No, it's just that…" She sighed. "Never mind."

I reached across the table and pulled something wrapped in brown paper out of a drawer. I slid it across the table. "For you. I bought it at our market today."

She smiled. "Thanks!"

She took her time opening the gift. Very slowly and meticulously, she unfolded every corner, careful not to tear anything. Even these small, minuscule movements made me want to haul her off from the kitchen to my room where I could unwrap her just like the package. The only difference was I was so hungry that I would plunge into her with reckless abandon while unable to hold back due to the need for gratification.

When she finally opened the gift and found what was inside, her smile brightened with approval.

"What's this?" Her eyes danced with delight as she picked up the necklace I had made for her by the village jeweler. Intricately

wrapped with rope twine was the red pebble she'd found on our journey. "I thought I lost this. You had it all along."

"You seemed attached to it."

"It just reminded me of something my father gave me."

"What's that?"

"A compass to help me find my way. I lost it after the bear attacked me," she said and then picked up the other gifts. "And a set of oil paints," she exclaimed. "New brushes! They look brand new. Where do you get them?"

I grinned. "Maybe through trade. But most likely through scavenging. We have people here who go out and forage the ruins for a living."

"Well, these are beautiful." She placed the necklace around her neck. "I can hardly wait to use the paints. Thank you."

"I thought you might like them."

"You know, no one ever gives me gifts unless something bad has happened or will follow," she said.

I bit the inside corner of my mouth. "Why do you say that?"

"My mother, it was her way of telling me sorry. My father would also try to make both of us happy. He'd bring things for us all the time. He's the one who bought me my first paintbrush, my first pair of binoculars, and my first camera. But, in your case, you were honest with me about why you took me and why you have to give me back."

"Karis...?" I started.

"I know what you're going to say. It's about the news, right? I told you not to feel guilty. You feel guilty, don't you?"

I turned away briefly and then leaned forward, placing my forearms on the table. "I'm going to be straight with you. Our scout came back with news from Stefan. A very injured Stefan, might I add."

"He was shot accidentally on a hunting trip," Karis supplied.

"Accidentally?"

She nodded. "Yes, that's what my cousin said."

"Whether it was an accident or not, he still runs his sector. I think you know very well that he would agree to just about anything to keep your marriage to him intact."

She looked down at the table, and then her demeanor shifted, and she held my gaze again. She rolled her eyes. "I know. So, million-dollar question...when will he come for me?"

“I imagine soon, but you won’t be here,” I stated.

“What?”

“You won’t be here when he comes for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll take the tanks the way we planned initially. By force,” I said.

“But isn’t that dangerous? You were trying to prevent losing people by taking me, right?”

“Yeah. But we don’t have to lose anyone. Stefan is weak at this point. Once we take back possession of the tanks, we know what we have to do to keep them. We won’t make the same mistake again by trusting him. And because I don’t trust him, I won’t be sending you back to him.”

She paused and then looked up. “I don’t want to go to Stefan. In my heart, I never did.”

“I know.”

“Then where will you be sending me?”

“There is a place. For omegas. I don’t even know of it.” I swallowed.

“And then?”

I glanced up. “What do you mean…and then?”

She sighed. “I just thought…maybe…well, it doesn’t matter what I think.”

“It does matter. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m a complication for you. That’s why you’re getting rid of me.”

“No…”

If she only knew my plan to save her from the enemy…and myself.

“I am. Just admit it. As long as I’m here, those other Alphas will keep coming looking for an omega. You want me gone so you don’t have to deal with that.”

“Is that what you think?”

She nodded and then got up from the table and took her empty glass to the sink.

I was right behind her when she turned around. No amount of gravity could pull us apart the moment I wrapped my arms around her waist, securing her to me. Her lips parted on a gasp, and I took them. We got lost in the moment, kissing and tasting. She was more delicious than I thought. Her lips tasted of sweetened cherries that I

wanted to devour all night long. With nothing stopping me, I could. And I would.

My taste buds swelled. My pheromones heightened. Our unique signature scents mingled together, creating an intoxicating mix. When I first witnessed the evidence of her slick between her thighs, I knew she'd been ready. But now that we had exchanged this kiss, we were both ready...aching...and hungry. In my arms like this, her heat rose again. The smell of slick was heavy in the air. I reached down to lift her dress to her waist. Her slick gushed down between her legs, coating the insides of her thighs.

I parted from the kiss, leaned down, and growled against the delicate skin on her neck. My tongue came out to taste her flesh, licking against her jugular as her pulse quickened.

"You asked. There is your answer. This is why," I rasped against her throat. "If you do not leave me, omega, I will claim you over and over again. I will spread your legs and fuck you. You will be covered with my scent and drenched with my seed. Is that what you want?"

Slick gushed down her legs, making a tiny puddle near the sole of her foot.

"Oh my God," she breathed, trying to squeeze her legs together. "What's happening?"

"Something tells me you've never been wet quite like this."

She shook her head. "Never in my life."

"Only an Alpha can do this to an omega."

"Please. I don't want to leave. I want...I want to..."

I kissed her lips. "You wanted a choice, remember?"

She nodded, but then she pressed her core against me, molding her soft breasts to my chest. She even lifted her neck as a sign of submission.

"What do you want, little one? Tell me, and you shall receive."

She wrapped her fingers around the neck, pulling my lips towards hers once more. "I want to know. Just this once. I want to know how it feels to be with an Alpha."

I chuckled against her sweet lips. "Once? Doesn't work that way. I won't do one-night stands. Not with you."

She writhed against me. "Then what? What do you do? Do it to me. Whatever it is."

My knot swelled when she begged. "You want to come? Will that make you feel better?"

She drew back to lock gazes with me and nodded. “Yes.”

I lifted her from the floor, cupping her ass to keep her close to me. I was hard as steel against her. My rod molded against the drenched seat of her panties. My balls jerked and tightened when she wrapped her legs around my waist. A few inches of soaking fabric was the only thing keeping me from burying my cock twelve inches deep inside her.

“Why am I like this?” she breathed.

“It’s natural. As natural as breathing. Whoever told you otherwise has led you astray. You deserve to feel, omega. Let me show you how.”

I placed her on the table, lifting her dress upward to bunch at her waist. The seat of her light blue cotton panties was wet. Honeysuckle aroma filled the small kitchen.

She pulled my head down to her cleavage, leading me to where she needed me the most. Unable to take her with the thin layer of annoyance preventing me from enjoying her thoroughly, I raked the dress over her head and chucked it aside. Her panties were flimsy. One tug, and I tore them right off of her.

I leaned down and took her nipple in my mouth. The sharp moan of delight that spilled from her lips encouraged me. I sucked and licked savagely at both breasts. Training her nipples to form stiff thimbles.

I led her back down on the table, intent on having her for dessert. She writhed and wriggled as my lips moved down her body. I kissed her delicate skin and drew circles around her belly button. One look at her pussy, and my cock hardened and lengthened even more. My balls filled with seed.

A puddle of slick pooled onto the table. I grabbed one thigh and pulled her to the end.

She gasped when my lips came in contact with her mound. She lifted her hips upward, begging me to go further.

“Please, Axil. Make me come.”

And I would. I would make her little pussy come over and over again.

I wrapped my lips around her juicy, swollen clit and tasted heaven. There was no stopping me from there. I licked at her sweet pussy like a man deprived. Over and over, she spilled her honeysuckle for me. Her taste was the best thing since sliced bread and beer. The way she ground her pussy against my mouth, I could

tell she needed something more. Of course, she did. This little omega craved what I wanted to give her most.

Unable to hold myself steady, I sat down in the dining chair and scooted her bottom dangerously near the edge where I could reach her. I intended to have my fill. It was only fair since she'd been tempting me with her aroma for days.

I released my heavily burdened cock from my trousers and wrapped my free hand around it, pumping it in time with my tongue fucking her pussy.

I slid one finger inside her. She took it without protest. Her bud swelled like a pebble from under the slick hood of her clit. I teased and worried her center until her walls were squeezing around my finger tightly. I added a second finger and began pumping it in and out of her. Her honey squirted into my mouth as I agitated her G-spot. The more I licked, the more she gave.

She thrashed about and caught fistfuls of my hair with both hands. Her body trembled. She came, screaming my name. I looked upward as I was eating her. Her eyes were closed. She looked at peace, and she was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

"Again, Karis. Come for me again," I rasped against her center. I curved my finger upward into her pussy and stroked. My tongue sucking at her clit sent her into another squirting climax.

I stood up while stroking and petting her pussy to keep her slick flowing. She lifted herself up on her forearms, and her eyes widened when she saw me stroking my meat to the sight of her beautiful omega body. She licked her lips, waiting in anticipation.

Without warning, my seed blast out of me, spraying against her breasts, navel, hips, and glistening pussy lips.

She arched her back and purred. "More, Axil. Give me more."

I could've flipped her around and taken her pussy and ass right then.

"Fuck." I bit into my lip and pumped my dick long and hard, letting streams of white cum splash all over her body, marking her for no one but me.

Even after all that, my knot was still overflowing with the urgent need to lock myself deep into her core. Her pussy looked super tempting, and I lowered my mouth to her pussy to help myself to more of her sweet juice. She came again, unraveling against my tongue.

Karis was still panting on the table and the last of my seed

hadn’t even drizzled out when a figure came barreling through the doorway.

My head jerked up.

Xenon halted near the threshold of the kitchen. His eyes widened at the sight before him. *“Holy heaven on a platter.”*

I stood up, wiping my mouth with the back of my wrist, and placed myself directly in front of Karis.

“You better have a good reason for busting in here,” I growled, stuffing my heavy nuts back in my trousers.

“What the fuck do you think, man?” Xenon replied. “Get out here. The fucking oil tanks are on fire!”

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Chapter Twenty

Axil

"The fuck?" I bellowed.

"They blew up the oil tanks. That asshole from Legance lit them afire," Xenon said.

"Which tanks? We have women and children in that area."

"Not our tanks. You know they'd never bring that shit into our territory. Our women and children are safe. The newer tanks were set afire. The tanks we just worked on. Boris and Xonar went out there to set things up for tomorrow's stakeout, and the whole field was on fucking fire with the banner of Legance flying high and untouched just outside the field." Xenon panted heavily with rough anxiety.

Behind me, Karis gasped. I grabbed my overcoat and covered her with it.

"It was Stefan, wasn't it? He did it for her." I grabbed a chain-linked belt from a hook on the door.

Xenon shook his head and followed me. "The deal was still on, Axil. He was going to relinquish both tanks to us when he found out we had this omega. It wasn't Stefan who did this."

Unable to comprehend what the hell was going on, I blurted out, "I'm going to murder that weasel." I grabbed my boots from the foyer.

If Xenon showing up out of the blue with dire news wasn't bad enough, Engine, the scout I sent, also burst through my door unannounced.

"You've told him?" Engine asked of Xenon.

"Trying to. Now go and make sure they contain the blaze until we get out there," Xenon said, shoving Engine back out the door.

Xenon grabbed my shoulders and forced me to stop suiting up and make eye contact with him. "Listen, Axil. *You're not listening.* Snap out of the rut. It wasn't Stefan who lit the damn tanks afire!"

"Who then, lit the tanks afire?" I demanded.

"The Wynnells. The Wynnells from Legance. That's who. They placed their sector banner there, staking claim, and then

intentionally started the blaze, killing the Anchora guards standing post. They proudly own up to this whole fiasco. They did that shit and ran."

"The Wynnells...?" I said under my breath as realization began to set in. My gaze shifted to a puzzled Karis and then back to Xenon as my mind slowly began to put the pieces together. "The Wynnells set the tanks afire?"

"Yes, blood brother," Xenon exclaimed. "That is right. The Wynnells did this. Right after Engine came back confirming that Stefan would trade the tanks in exchange for—" he nodded directly at Karis "—for this *omega*, Stefan's sector was seized and taken by Legance. That news came at the same time we learned the tanks were blown up. This act of retaliation was not of Stefan's doing, Axil. The Wynnells killed him. Stefan, the weasel, is dead."

My whole body went rigid with fresh rage.

Thank goodness I sensed the change in Karis as she stood directly behind me. If I hadn't turned around and caught her as she passed out from shock, she might have hurt herself on her way down to the floor.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Karis

I was welcomed back to reality with a raging headache. Everything hurt, especially the needy ache between my legs. And before I woke up, I knew what was happening. *It* was happening again.

I opened my eyes. Sitting on the right side of the bed was Sorex.

She grinned. “You know, I’m getting tired of being your maid, and it’s only been a couple of days now.”

I smiled and chuckled despite the dire situation. I had only known Sorex for a short time, but it was clear she was known for cracking jokes while in a bind.

“Come on. Wake up,” she said in her usual chipper voice. “I’m tired of talking to myself, too.”

“Sorex,” I said, lifting myself up. Axil’s fur blanket covered me. His smell was everywhere, but I knew he was gone. I sighed, and my shoulders slumped. “I caused all of this, didn’t I?”

Sorex sat on the bed next to me with her back leaned against the headboard. “No and yeah. Depends on what you’re asking about.”

“Everything.”

She chuckled. “Well, it’s true. Axil has gone into a rut and he can hardly function, which means you’re experiencing your rise and your feelings are probably going all haywire.”

“You’re right. My head is swirling right now. My emotions are mixed up so bad I feel like I’ll pass out again.”

“Okay, let’s close our eyes and breathe.” She took my hand and then peeked to make sure I was doing it. “Come on. Close your eyes.”

I did her breathing exercises for about two minutes. The calming activity helped with the rising anxiety, but not so much the rising heat. I didn’t tell her that, though, but I figured she already knew.

“Axil’s cousin. Beta. Archer. Anxiety buster. What else are you? Miracle worker? Doctor?” I chuckled.

“Yeah, actually…yes.” She nodded.

My eyes widened. “Really?”

“Miracle worker? No. Doctor, sort of. I’m what you would call one of the village nurses. You know, like trauma. They would rather I assist the actual doctor here taking things out than putting arrows in an asshole’s foot, er—leg.”

“Well, I’m sure you’re a very good nurse.”

“I guess. Yesterday, when Axil called me over to make sure you were okay, I expected a spoiled brat. I’m relieved that you’re not.”

“I’m not spoiled. Trust me on that.” I frowned. “I still want things now that I don’t have.”

“Like what?”

“Answers for one.” I shrugged.

“You mean about what happened?” Sorex asked.

I nodded. “Why would they kill Stefan? Why would my uncle blow up the oil tanks?”

“Are you sure it was your uncle?” she asked.

“That’s what Xenon said before I passed out. He said the Wynnells blew up the tank after killing Stefan. I don’t get it. Why?” I shook my head. “This wasn’t their fight. Why would they intervene?”

“We’ll have answers when Axil gets back.”

Butterflies danced in my belly. I was nervous and scared about what might happen to Axil out there.

“Don’t worry,” Sorex said, as if detecting my anxiety. “Axil and the other Alphas will be fine. They’re just putting the fire out right now. They had to drag a pipe from the dam to get enough water to put the damn thing out. I don’t think anything will happen tonight. Those Wynnell cowards set the fire and then ran like dogs with their tails between their legs.”

I looked down at my hands, swallowing. A vision of Arthur reiterating that I was a Wynnell by blood came back to me. Suddenly, I didn’t feel proud of being related to him.

“Oh, sorry…he’s your uncle.”

“It’s okay. You’re right. If they did that, they’re total cowards for doing it.”

“But you’re not like them, Karis. I can tell. You were raised differently.”

I laughed. “I practically raised myself. My mother was always sick.”

“Was she? Or was she just confused about her triggered gene?” Sorex challenged.

“Triggered? Who could’ve triggered her gene?”

“An Alpha, of course. She was human, as are you. If her omega gene was dormant, the only thing that could’ve triggered it was the touch of an Alpha.”

Sighing, I closed my eyes, realizing how discomposed my mother must have felt throughout her life.

“Your father. What was he like?” Sorex asked.

“He was like a father should be until his brother banished him for fraud and treason.”

Sorex’s eyes filled with skepticism. “And he left you willingly in your uncle’s care?”

I shrugged. “He didn’t have a choice.”

“Well, of course, he did. You were his only daughter, right?”

“Yeah.” I shook my head dismissively. “But things work differently in the sectors. We have our rules. He broke them.”

“Sure. But you know what? It’s a good thing you never have to go back to all those unfair rules.”

I exhaled in relief. “If this has something to do with me and going back would make things right again, I would. But why would my uncle blow up oil tanks? It’s stupid. That was a stupid decision when resources are so limited everywhere.”

“It was stupid. And just so you know, Axil would never allow you to sacrifice yourself. He’s prepared to send you into protected lands to a place he can never go. He would do that for you so that you never have to be married off to a weasel like Stefan or forced to comply with demands from archaic men like the Wynnells. He wants you to have a choice, Karis. If you want to know the real reason he called me, it’s because I know how to get you to those protected lands. You won’t be the only omega there running from a fate she doesn’t want.”

I turned, taking Sorex’s hand. “But I’m not running from this fate. I don’t want to go to protected lands. I know why he’s sending me away, but I can’t change the circumstances under which I was born. By some odd and cruel fate, I am now free. But now, I have a choice.”

“And he’s making sure you’ll always have a choice. I’ve known Axil all my life. He will protect you, but he is an Alpha through and through, just like the rest of them. All the instincts are there. He’s just very good at mastering them, and he’s had years to do so. Many Alphas don’t have his level of control. They simply do not care to

rein it in. Here's something you have to remember. These Alphas aren't ordinary humans. They are a different breed from what you're used to. Considering what you've faced, I understand why he suggested sending you away. If you stay here among Alphas, you will be claimed with the way you're sending them into ruts with your untamed heat. Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

I didn't pause for one single beat.

Sorex sighed. "Well, that was a stupid question to ask an omega. I'm supposed to be convincing you to run away from horny Alphas, but you've already decided, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have."

"I should have known. Both of you are infatuated with each other."

"Hmmm, if he's so infatuated with me, then why doesn't he do something about it? Why doesn't he claim me so no one else will?" I asked, heat rising up my spine for even asking. "I feel unclaimed. How can I feel that? When Axil is gone, I feel incomplete. When he's with me, I would do anything to keep him *with* me."

"You're beginning to sound like a true omega coming into her own," she laughed. "As for Axil waiting to claim you, he's probably going through hell trying to contain his rut and protect you at the same time. He can claim you over and over and over again all he wants. It'll only mask your heat from other Alphas until your next rise. The only way you will truly be his and he will truly be yours is if you submit. And then, no bond between you can ever be broken. This goes far beyond a marriage in name only. You'll be bonded for life. That's why it must be your choice. No true Alpha would beg an omega to submit to him. He can claim her, but until she submits, she's not that Alpha's omega and she was never intended to be."

"Then I know what I have to do."

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Karis

Was Axil okay?

I was supposed to be resting, but how could I sleep, not knowing where he was and if or when he was coming back?

Sorex left sometime just before sunrise, and my mind went haywire with all the possible bad outcomes.

I cuddled on the couch, bundling up under two of Axil's fur blankets with an overcoat draped over my shoulders. I tried to completely immerse myself in what comforted me while he was gone. I found that anything that smelled of him or reminded me of him worked. With his aroma all around me, I grabbed a blank drawing pad and began a nature sketch just to stay awake.

Sun filtered through the window and my eyelids grew heavy. I fought sleep as long as I could.

I wasn't sure if I drifted off to sleep, but I remembered hearing something outside and suddenly sitting up. An overwhelming feeling took me, and in that moment, I knew my Alpha was near.

My Alpha.

I just proclaimed to myself that Axil was mine.

As if the reaction that followed was second nature to me, a deep hunger started growing in my core.

Axil was home.

I jumped up from the chair the moment he opened the door.

I paused to take all of him in. His wide shoulders stretched the entire expanse of the door frame. His gray eyes held an intensity that suspended me in that moment. His black hair was disheveled. He was shirtless with rips in his trousers. He held his chain-linked belt in one hand. And he was dirty. Black ashes smeared across every surface of his exposed skin.

Flames coursed through my veins. Even in this state, he was the sexiest being I had ever seen. I was instantly aroused. His nostrils flared, and he dropped the belt in the foyer.

I ran to him, throwing my arms around his neck so I could hold him and feel his warmth close to me. He titled my chin upward and

took my lips, pushing his tongue deep into my mouth. The kiss was long and demanding.

I broke away. “Axil. I’m sorry.”

“Shhh.” He kissed me again. “Do not worry.”

I touched an inch-long scratch over his left eyebrow. “But you’re hurt.”

He smiled meekly. “I’ll heal. We can fix things.”

“Is everyone okay? Is the fire out?”

“Yeah.” He nodded.

“What happened out there?”

“That fire almost kicked our asses, that’s what. Add wind to the equation, and it took an army to put out.”

I clenched my teeth, angry at my uncle for doing this. “I don’t know what to say.”

“None of this is any of your fault.” He shook his head and then whispered, “Three days.”

“Three days?”

“Our men need time to recover before we strike back. In three days, I leave for Legance. Can you forgive me in advance for what I will do?”

I swallowed. “I understand. Just….there are women and children there, too. Don’t—”

“I would never hurt innocents,” he reassured me.

“I know you wouldn’t.”

“You have not slept,” he said.

“How can you tell?”

“I just know. Just like I know you’re in heat again. Before I leave, I’ll take care of you, omega. The masking will stave off other Alphas until I return.”

I gasped and trembled against him. “Masking? Like you did before? On the kitchen table?”

“Yes, Karis. Like that.”

I swallowed, thinking about how good it felt to be covered in Axil’s seed. But I wanted more. “Axil, I have to tell you something…”

He touched my bottom lip gently with his calloused thumb. My tongue parted through my lips, tasting him. He cupped the back of my neck with his palm and bent to take my mouth again. He was hard all over. His erection pressed into my core. I couldn’t stop thinking about what he did to me and what he was still capable of

doing to me.

"Sorex could not convince you to leave for your own good," he stated.

I shook my head. "You know I never wanted to."

He leaned down and picked me up from the floor.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to show you where we wash when the water levels are low and restricted. After that fire, they will be for a week for the whole village." He picked up an overcoat from the chair and covered me with it before taking me out the back door.

There was another lake nearby past the row of trees behind his house. I was so caught up in having him back with me that I hardly noticed the other people wading in the lake, probably with the same idea.

Axil dropped the overcoat by the shore and took me into the lake still cradled in his arms. I might have felt naked with anyone else in panties and bra, but with Axil, I felt complete.

The water felt refreshing against my skin, but I knew it would do nothing but wash away Axil's scent and his masking.

He took us waist deep in the water where overhanging branches from a tree provided us with some privacy. He lifted my hair from the water and pressed a single kiss to my nape. A soul-sealing spark ignited within me. But he didn't stop there. He peppered kisses all over my back and even traced the scar I almost forgot I had. Before, I had been careful to always keep it hidden—afraid that someone would call me ugly or remind me I'd done something wrong and had been punished for it.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered. "What was I thinking? If you had left me, I would never have recovered from the heartbreak."

He stroked my skin, washing me with his bare hands. Even when his fingers slid down into the seat of my panties, I didn't protest. But I did arch against him, wishing his fingers were his cock instead.

I turned around in his arms and began clearing off the smudges of black ash from his face with my wet fingers. I did the same to him, sliding my bare hands over his body, which was a work of art entirely. I wanted to paint on him with my fingers. I wanted to memorize every inch of him.

He had his eyes closed and appeared to enjoy the way I washed

away the dirt.

"You like this?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Don't worry, Alpha. I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to take care of you before you leave and long after you return."

His eyes flew open when I made my declaration. "Karis...?"

I took his hand and pulled him behind me. "Come." I led him from the river, and as I did so, I felt in control of my body and my mind. This was my choice, and I would let it be known.

When we emerged from the lake, I lowered myself to both knees and sat back on my heels. This felt right. This display of submission before the Alpha of my choice. My omega instincts knew what was required of me. His Alpha instincts sensed that I had accepted him. Even now, his cinnamon and chestnut smell rose to form a barrier around me. Around us.

The air was thick with unmuted tension, and all the attention had completely turned on us—Axil and me. The wind could be heard howling through the trees, but nothing else. Everyone stared, waiting in anticipation.

I lifted my eyes, locking my gaze with his. His eyes sparked with life, and a corner of his mouth twitched upward. In that moment, I knew we had both chosen each other.

"Alpha. My Alpha. I choose you."

"*Mine.* My omega," he declared.

He slipped his hand under my chin, and I rose. His lips touched mine with tantalizing persuasion, but then his actions became more profound and he forced my lips open with his thrusting tongue. I kissed him, lingering in the heated moment.

He wrapped his arms around my midriff and picked me back up. This time, he raced to the house. We were locked inside before I realized he had peeled my bra away and torn my panties off.

On the inside of the house, he pushed my back against the wall, holding my legs spread wide to accommodate his girth. I arched into him, grinding my soaking wet center to his pants.

"Take them off. Now. I need to feel you," I urged.

The sound of a thud and a slight shift here and there, and Axil was free from his trousers. The next time he touched my pussy was with the massive length of his bare cock. I ground my clit up against his rod, and a gush of slick streamed down my pussy and his legs.

“I want you,” he rasped against my throat.

My head fell back against the wall. “I need you inside. Now.”

He growled as his balls tightened against me. Even now, I could sense his hesitation. He molded his lips to my jugular and licked there. His teeth lightly scraped the skin, and I bucked.

“Oh God. Please,” I begged.

“No matter what, I must do to protect you in this life. I will never hurt you. You do know that, right? Tell me you know that.”

I nodded. “I do. I know it.”

When he hooked my thighs over his arm, I looked down at his cock. It was perfection standing up at strict attention between us. He was as big around as my wrist, and the length had to have been twelve inches. Milky white pre-cum spilled from the tip, and I licked my lips.

“Axil, you’re big,” I murmured.

“Your body was made for an Alpha. For me. The only thing my cock will deliver is your pleasure. I promise.”

I hooked my arm around his neck and pressed my opening to his head. My world began spiraling out of control when he pushed the first inch inside.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “Your pussy is already trying to milk me inside.”

True to his word, he delivered pleasure, driving his thick cock inside me and impaling me against the wall. I screamed once as he rocked me into blinding ecstasy. My pussy milked him, coating him with thick slick that assisted my center to accommodate to his size. He was fully seated, balls deep in my passage.

They had lied to me, telling me virgins only experienced pain the first time. This wasn’t pain. This was bliss.

When he began to move, I dropped my head to his shoulder.

“My Omega.”

“Yes, Alpha. I’m all yours.”

He drove in and out slowly at first and then picked up speed. Once my orgasms started, they were never-ending. I never knew I was capable of multiple orgasms in one session, but with Axil, anything seemed possible.

I could barely speak. Only breathe and scream and cry out his name as he rocked into me.

My pussy enveloped him like a glove. It felt perfect. As he stroked me, his cock expanded even more.

I kissed his neck. Eager for more, I let my tongue glide across the juncture where his neck and shoulder met just as he'd done mine earlier. Something coated my tongue. The taste resembled cinnamon and nutmeg. I bared my teeth, panting.

"Yes, Karis. Claim me. Do it."

I grabbed fistfuls of his hair and latched onto his shoulder. I didn't know what I was capable of before, but the bite I delivered wasn't just a mere surface bite. My teeth broke the skin. Axil didn't flinch nor resist as I marked him. I had claimed my Alpha. It was done now.

The revelation sent me into another climax, and I trembled against him. He kept the tempo, driving into me with deep thrusts. The walls of my pussy began to constrict and tighten around his cock at the same moment his knot swelled up inside me.

Once we were locked inside, he leaned forward and claimed me with his Alpha's bite, mirroring my own actions. I cried out as white-hot pleasure seared my insides. My slick, together with his seed, created an intoxicating potion that sent us both to another plane, to another world, into our own moment in time.

Long after he came, his knot was still locked inside of me with the head of his cock pulsing at my womb. Knowing my purpose and the end game, I took all of his seed into my womb.

He caught my stare and grinned. "Feel better now, omega?"

I nodded. "So much better."

With his cock still hard as a boulder inside me, he carried me into the bedroom, laid me on the bed, and I embraced him with open arms.

Axil took me again and again and again. That night...or day. I couldn't even remember. It didn't matter. The time of day was irrelevant when I knew I'd be bonded to an Alpha for eternity.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Karis

Night folded into day, but then we realized that the world was going on without us as we remained in bed in a heat-induced fog. But I was happy to know I was giving my Alpha exactly what he needed to function.

Axil had promised to take me on a tour of their entire village. The whole tour would take at least three days, he said. I suggested we begin the tour after things calmed down, especially with the amount of work that needed to be done in his village to prepare for the next season, and also because he was scheduled to leave in a couple of days. He was the Alpha-in-Charge currently. And no one knew when all the Alphas would agree to pass the invisible torch to the next man. Presumably, most big decisions happened whenever Echo was around, but no one had heard from him in quite some time.

I dreaded thinking what would happen when Axil faced my wayward family. I even mentioned once that I could come along, but he shot that suggestion down with the quickness. No Alpha would allow his omega to join him on a mission that could end in tragedy if things didn't go as planned.

Now that my life in Legance was behind me, I was eager to learn about where they lived. Even though I had only been to the market for fresh food, everyone had been so nice to me.

No one mentioned the cruel way my uncle burned down their oil tanks.

No one mentioned my status as a claimed omega.

No one criticized me for being born the daughter of a mother with questionable morals.

No one stared or whispered.

No one judged.

They only knew one thing. I was Axil's omega, and he was my Alpha.

I had abandoned my sketch hours ago to start dinner. It was going to be a surprise for Axil, since he'd been the one preparing all

the meals so far. I was cooking, yet all I could think about was fucking.

Their customs were slightly different. In Legance, the women were responsible for securing the food, preparing, and cooking it. In Axil's village, he brought fresh food home every night after work for the next couple of days. It wasn't unheard of for the Alpha to cook every night. Since my nesting instincts had already kicked in, I found myself tidying the home. Axil didn't seem to mind. He even suggested that he had neglected the upkeep when they voted him in as AIC.

I heard someone coming up the path and glanced outside. Grinning widely when I learned it was Axil, I pulled off my apron and raced to the cabinet to grab all of the plates and utensils.

When he crossed the doorway to the kitchen, he took my breath away. I would never get tired of seeing him smudged in dirt and oil from a hard day's work. I blushed, and slick instantly coated my pussy.

"Hi," I said. "I made a light dinner so you don't have to."

His tongue parted his mouth. He licked his lips as he stared at me.

"Karis," he said. "I am happy to eat your dinner."

He came into the kitchen, dumped a basket of fresh bread and cheese on the table, and wrapped his arms around my waist. He kissed me tenderly and began backing me up against the kitchen sink.

He was hard as a rock, and my pussy clenched around nothing. I was empty, but more than ready to feel the solid warmth and length of my Alpha inside me.

"But first..."

He turned me around until my back was to him and lifted my dress. As soon as his fingers found my clit, I was bucking back against him.

"Alpha..." I whispered.

"I love the way you say that, the way you call me your Alpha." He grabbed my hair back into a ponytail and lifted it away from my nape. His mouth fell to my shoulder, right next to the spot where he first marked me.

He used my slick to lubricate his fingers and then pushed two digits into my forbidden hole while gliding his thumb through my drenched slit.

“That’s it. Cream for me,” he commanded.

“Please, take me again.”

Never in a million years would I have thought I’d be begging for a man like Axil to take me over and over again. We had just had sex hours mere ago before he left to bargain with traders for a tanker full of oil. Yet, here I was, grinding my ass against his well-endowed erection like a sex-crazed fiend.

My passage gripped his fingers greedily, but I knew where I wanted him most.

“Fuck, I need to be inside you,” he exclaimed.

He bent me over the counter and entered me firmly from behind. My pussy clenched his cock, and slick drained down my legs like a fountain as he fucked me. He used my hair like a rope, pulling it so my back was arched and his cock drove deeper.

“Yes, Axil,” I moaned.

He pounded into me, leading me into an intense climax. His orgasm followed shortly after, and then his knot swelled, taking me over the edge once more.

With the evidence of our desire melting to the floor, I turned around.

As he kissed my lips, he kneaded my ass in his palms.

I chuckled against his lips. “You’re insatiable.”

“You satisfy me completely, Karis. You’re just impossible to resist.”

I smiled.

“Now I’m hungry for dinner, little one. Afterward, I will enjoy you for dessert.”

I squealed in giggles when he nipped the underside of my chin.

I would never get tired of this.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Axil

I was leaving. Again.

Prep to go on a long trip had never been fun. By instinct, Alphas tended to stay on their own turf, but in this day and age, if we wanted to survive, we had to conform and adapt. We had to be smarter and just as strategic as our enemies and our allies.

I wasn't looking forward to leaving my village so soon again, especially since Karis would be left alone in a place she wasn't familiar with. Karis and Sorex had instantly become friends, but I always had a feeling the two of them would have more in common than any other beta or omega female in the village. The other omegas were usually busy with their Alphas, but Sorex had enough experience to assist Karis in the case that something came up.

Soon, she'd be able to roam the village and transact household business alone. I was grateful she was learning the ropes so quickly.

Even as I thought about her now, knowing that she was in my home nesting, still very much in heat and waiting for me to come home and fuck her, my cock twitched and my knot swelled. Her pussy had felt like heaven this morning before I left, and I was ready to fulfill both our needs when I got back home. I would give it to her good, knowing it could be a few days before I touched her again.

The Alphas and I would head out first thing in the morning, but everyone had to be accounted for the day before. We were taking more than just a few good men. Not quite an army, but a considerable amount of reinforcement should things go wrong at any sector's borders or once we got to Legance.

The Wynnells probably knew we were coming. They were probably planning on it.

They knew I had Karis. I had bloody-well made it known that she was mine.

No request came from them to hand Karis back, so I concluded that them lashing out by blowing up the tanks was never about her.

This was about something else, and I was going to get to the

bottom of it, even if I had to stake a man through the heart.

"So, you ready to catch weasel number two and three?" Xenon asked, shoving some stuff down into a bag.

"If you mean trapping them while off guard and stringing them up in a tree for a slow death, yes," I replied.

"If they did this, they do not deserve a slow death. They could've gotten people killed. Innocent people," Xenon exclaimed.

"Yeah, I know. I'm trying to remain level-headed and calm. I don't want to scare Karis. I don't want to say anything that will make her worry. But you know how we are. We're going to do what needs to be done."

Xenon punched me hard in the gut. "You're getting soft, AIC."

"Yeah? Well, wait until it happens to you. Just wait until you find your omega."

Xenon shook his head dismissively. "Naw, I'm good. I get through my ruts just fine these days."

"Whatever, X."

Just as I was about to roll leather strips around tent poles for my travel bag, a quarrel broke out toward the front of the village.

Without hesitation, I bolted up and ran. I was AIC, and I squashed all quarrels between other Alphas or any other gender, no matter what it took.

But when I reached the clearing, I learned that this wasn't a fight among members of my clan.

Two Alphas were dragging a grown man by a thick chain across the ground. When they saw me, they pulled him up only to throw him at my feet.

Nygel pointed. "Trespasser."

The man had scrapes and bruises and scratches all over him. His clothes were almost torn to shreds. Just how far had they dragged his ass?

I growled. "Why did you bring him in the village?"

"He was already close by. He had a makeshift shelter near the cage. He'd been set up there for a bit. Maybe two days," Nygel replied.

"Please…don't kill me," the man begged, coughing.

"I have every right to kill you. This is what we do to trespassers. You are not one of us. How did you get in here?" I demanded.

"A merchant guided me here. Please I've been in the elements for three days. Do you have water please?"

I grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him up from the ground. “Old man, you had best tell me why you are trespassing on our territory.”

“Ka-Karis,” he croaked.

I let him go. “What did you say?”

“Karis. I’m here to talk to Karis. Please. I know you’ve got her. I know one of you took her.”

At the mention of my omega’s name coming from this man’s mouth, I clenched my fists.

“What is your relation to Karis?”

“I’ll only speak to her.”

“You cannot speak to her.” I shook my head and then reached for an ax sitting near a stump. “You have ten seconds to tell me who you are and why you’re here.”

“No, please…”

“Ten…nine…eight…”

“I’m Andy. Andy Wynnell. I—”

The ax was at his jugular a split second after revealing his identify.

“*Please*, don’t kill me! I did nothing. I did not do what you think. I was like a father to Karis. She will want to know I’m here. Please, just let me speak to her.” He held up his hands.

I cocked my head to the side. “Like a father?”

“I’m not the enemy, savage. Let me speak to her. I won’t hurt her. I’d rather harm myself. She has to know. Someone has to tell her now before it’s too late. Kill me afterwards, but let me see her one more time. *I am begging you.*”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Karis

My father? My father had come to Axil's village?

Well, that was impossible. Wasn't it?

I stopped what I was doing as soon as someone from the clan alerted me of his arrival. Leaving the wash bucket of clothes on the front porch, I ran all the way there until I saw the crowd of people.

Axil and my father were in the center. My father was on his knees with chains binding his ankles and wrists.

"Father!" I screamed, shooting past Axil to go to his aid. "Get these off him! He's not an animal." I looked up at Axil. "Now."

Axil gestured for another to unbind him.

"Father, why did you come here? If Arthur knows that you contacted me, he'll have you killed," I panted.

"No, Karis...listen Karis. Please listen..." He coughed.

Axil handed me a canteen of water, and I handed it to him to drink. He took huge gulps, chugging the liquid down like he hadn't had a drink in days.

"I'm so sorry, Karis."

"What are you sorry for? I'm free now. Stefan is dead. Uncle Arthur killed him. Haven't you heard?"

"Oh, Karis..." He pressed his palm to my cheek. "Precious little Karis."

He took another chug of water, breathing heavily.

"It wasn't Arthur who killed Karis. It was Leon. Leon did it. He went there and did it out of spite. He killed Stefan. He killed the man you were set to marry, and then he returned to Legance and killed Arthur. Leon killed both so he could have it all," my father exclaimed.

"What?" My heart dropped. "Leon did this. And uncle is dead?"

"Yes. Leon shot him in the back of the head after an argument."

Axil and the other Alphas shifted impatiently behind me. I grabbed my chest, and Axil placed his hand supportively on my back.

"How do you know this, old man?" one asked him.

“I am a Wynnell, myself. How do you think I know? I am banished from Legance, but I was still close by until I learned Karis had been kidnapped by you savages. I came specifically to tell her.”

“You are the savage. Look at you,” the Alpha countered, snatching the canteen from Andy’s hands.

Axil held up one hand, halting Nygel from any further aggression. “That’s enough, Nygel.”

“Listen to me, Karis.” My father grabbed for my hands.

“Do not touch her,” Axil warned, gently reaching for my hands and taking them away. “Speak. Do not touch.”

“I told you. I wouldn’t hurt her,” my father protested.

“I know what you did. You sat back her entire life and set her up to marry that weasel. I don’t care if he didn’t set the tanks on fire. You did this to her. You’re her father, and you did this. You sent her there to marry him against her will.”

“I know. That’s what I’m here to own up to. But you’re wrong about one thing. I’m not her biological father. Arthur Wynnel is. I’m your uncle Karis, not your real father.”

My knees buckled, but I caught myself before caving to the ground. And I knew Axil wouldn’t let me fall.

I shook my head. “No. You raised me. You…you said…” I paused to catch my breath. “My mother…this can’t be true.”

“Think about it, Karis. Joella and I never had children after we married. It’s because I cannot have kids. I’m infertile.”

“But…”

“When Stefan’s father demanded that your mother tell him who the father of her child was, she couldn’t say it was Arthur. It would’ve caused a scandal bigger than this planet. I agreed to take the fall for my brother, so he could continue to campaign for a position on the council. Arthur convinced your mother to never tell, promising she’d never want for anything. It’s why she didn’t work. My brother was paying her to keep quiet.”

“This was all fake. You and her? And you being a father to me?”

“No.” He shook his head. “None of that was fake. I loved your mother. I loved her even before she took my brother’s seed. I adopted you as my own. We were a family. All of that is true.”

“I don’t know what to say. Arthur’s my real father?”

“Yes, Karis.”

“How do you know? Were you there when they did it?” I demanded.

“No. I mean…maybe…” Andy lowered his gaze, and his shoulders slumped. “I once thought your real father could’ve been some savages that lived in the ruins just outside of Anchora, but the timing didn’t add up. She claims she was raped once by savages, but no one was there to bear witness. But anyway, the rape happened almost a year before you were conceived. My brother was with her on the night of the picnic at the twelfth annual hunting games. I saw them. She didn’t know I was there watching them.” He paused, and a large lump rose in this throat.

“And then what?” I urged, my voice almost catching my throat as I felt his sorrow.

He rubbed his face. “Two months later, she said she was pregnant, and then seven months after that, you were born. I’m infertile. That’s why I couldn’t get her pregnant. That made things easier for us to be together. We hid our relationship without fear of her becoming pregnant. I didn’t know she was also with my brother…who *was* fertile.”

I shook my head. “If she slept around, it could’ve been anyone.”

“No, Karis. You are my brother’s child. You have Wynnell blood, but you’re not my child. Arthur is your biological father,” he said. “When Leon found out that he wasn’t the only heir to the Wynnell fortune, he shot Arthur dead.”

I sulked.

“Don’t be sorry, Karis. He was going to use you. Your father was going to use you as a means to gain Anchora. Your brother, Leon, is infertile as well. I suspected Arthur knew this, but it’s pretty much confirmed now. He fucks everything that walks. He’s been doing it for years and still hasn’t gotten anyone pregnant.”

“So, Leon killed Stefan so our marriage wouldn’t happen and I wouldn’t produce an heir before he did,” I concluded.

“Leon thought Arthur would begin to favor you. Truthfully, I believe your father was going to tell you at some point. When Leon’s first attempt to kill Stefan failed, he got anxious.”

“First attempt?” I muttered uneasily. “The hunting games…the arrows. Then, it wasn’t an accident.”

“Leon was the first on the scene when Stefan fell after he got hit. He was shot in the back at close range. That arrow missed his heart by a fraction,” he said with detached certainty. “How could that have been an accident?”

“Why did he blow up tanks full of oil? The oil has nothing to do

with it," I inquired.

"I know why," Axil offered. "It was a warning. Leon would never do business with us. He was warning us to stay off his land."

"Exactly," Andy said. "You have been trading with Stefan for years now, haven't you? Stefan has been dealing with you savages behind Arthur's and Leon's backs. Well, Leon caught wind of the rumors …obviously. Anchora now belongs to him, and he's making it known that any agreements Stefan made with you are null and void."

Axil growled. "I would like to make something clear to him, but I would like to do it to his face."

I stood up and pressed myself against Axil's chest. His comforting embrace was the only thing keeping me from utter panic. Yet, I knew that even though his strokes to my hair were gentle, anger raged in his heart.

Everything I was told; it was all lies. I had one truth now and one thing to live for. My Alpha's love. If it wasn't for him, this treachery might have ended me. I tilted my lips up to his and kissed him. When he drew back from the kiss to stroke my bottom lip with his thumb and peer into my eyes like I was the only thing that mattered, I knew destiny had led me here. But surely, this wasn't the end.

"What will you do now?" I asked.

"What I planned to do. He should've left us out of it. No one threatens us and then runs off like a coward."

"He has to pay. He has to."

Xenon grabbed the ax from Axil, propped it over his left shoulder, and declared, "Guess this means war."

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Epilogue

Xenon

"Let's go, Ketil!" I banged a fist on the outside wall of the small bungalow, then stared at the retreating backs of the other Alphas wondering if I should leave Ketil's slow-ass behind.

"Get out here now!" I yelled. "You're gonna get left behind."

"Be right out. Coming out..." he called from inside.

I grumbled, pulled my dick out, and pissed on the ground.

I couldn't remember the name of this little uncharted village, but Axil Greyblood had insisted we stop here to leave a message for Echo, our clan leader. He was scheduled to make a pitstop here within the next couple of days. We couldn't wait for him in person. We had a different mission, and Axil swore time wasn't on our side. Echo would be impressed that we took matters into our own hands under these dire circumstances.

Our clan leader never stayed in one place for too long. And it was in his nature to wander. No one faulted him for being the way he was. After all, years ago, on one dreadful night that no one ever talked about anymore, he inherited a vast land spanning hundreds of miles and a clan of Alphas.

Whenever Echo returned to home base, he came bearing gifts, rare tools, and hard-to-find medicines that we could not otherwise secure on the open market. Even though he was the true heir of Mistacre and Northgarde, our home base, he guided more than he led. It wasn't a mystery to anyone; true Alphas couldn't be controlled. None of us could be controlled. We were free to come and go as we pleased.

A woman propping a basket of veggies against her hip walked past slowly. She threw a seductive look at me and batted her eyelashes. I wasn't a stranger to sexually-charged advances from women. She knew who we were, she knew what I was, and she knew exactly what I was capable of doing to her.

So many of my fellow brothers had indulged in the finer things while we rested here last night, but I just wasn't interested. My ruts came and went like the tides, but I had gotten good at distracting

myself—and relieving myself. To an Alpha, a case of blue balls felt like walking around with rock-hard testicles. Sooner or later, something had to give.

When Ketil still didn't come out of the hut, I decided to see what was taking him so long. I marched up the steps and jerked open the door.

The sight before me hadn't taken me by surprise, but I rolled my eyes anyway.

Despite my interruption, Ketil proceeded to jack-hammer the length of his dick into the mouth of a redhead resting on her knees.

"Ah, no. Come on, man," I said.

"Coming," Ketil grunted. "Just wait." He didn't stop.

The female nearly choked as Ketil held the back of her head and drove fast and deep down her throat. Streams of saliva and pre-cum dripped from her lips and onto her tits.

"Don't have time for this, pumpkin. On your hands and knees," Ketil ordered quickly, bending the chick over on the floor to mount her.

I slammed the door and walked off. "Son of a bitch," I mumbled under my breath, running my hand through my hair. I picked up a twig from the ground and gnawed on it.

Who could blame the guy? He scratched an itch as best he could. Who was I kidding? It *was* the best way. After all, no Alpha wanted to go to battle while he suffered from an unquenched rut. Sexual deprivation clouded our judgment, especially if we ignored the need too long.

A minute later, Ketil exited the hut, zipping up his trousers.

"Dude," I said. "You were supposed to pay her for the damn bread she packed for all of us, not throat-fucking the hell out of her."

Ketil gave a short laugh. "What are you talking about, bro? I paid her in full." He threw his arm over my shoulders and we walked away from the village. "No Alpha left behind, eh? Ready to go pick a fight?"

"Of course I am."

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BANISHED

The Uncaged 2

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Book Summary

Banished

I don't need a savior. Or a bodyguard.
Or the protection of a seven-foot-tall, rugged Alpha who thinks he can lay claim to whatever he wants—including me.

After I was chained by the Uncaged, I planned my escape. As much as I want to resist my abductor, I can't deny the untamed heat coursing through my body whenever he touches me.

An unbreakable mate bond has formed between us, but the guilt of my past becomes a burden. He knows my secret. And if I reveal all, the clans may go to war.

I'm determined to fight my way out of this. But the uncaged beast enjoys the thrill of the hunt. He calls me his omega and declares I am his to claim.

Banished is Xenon's and Meadow's romance arc. Each book of the series should be read in publication order to complete the main story arc.

The Uncaged m/f omegaverse takes place on a dystopian earth and combines paranormal and fantasy elements. There's plenty of romance, steam, and Alpha Omega bonding. The story contains some triggers such as descriptive violence and sex and offensive language, but never any cheating or ow/om drama.

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Preface

“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” Abraham Lincoln

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Prologue

Xenon

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"Of course, I am."

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Chapter One

Meadow

I took a deep breath and lifted my face to the wind as it blew across my face, sending a breeze through my baggy clothes. Swiping sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand, I glared at the setting sun. Tomorrow would be a new day, but there was still no end in sight to my misery.

I massaged my shoulders and neck as other detainees worked alongside me in the courtyard. Some of them weren't even working; they were just pretending to while picking at the ground to pass the time. Who could blame them? None of us were getting paid for any of this shit. I would bet my next meal that the majority of us were being held for crimes we never even committed. But ... I could only speak for myself.

"Get to work, you!" one of the resource officers barked at me.

I rolled my eyes and, without saying a word, raked some dry, crumbled leaves into a pile. I was two sunsets away from shoving the rake handle up her ass and dealing with the consequences later.

But I was only a few weeks away from being released from my community service duties. I hesitated to do anything that could lengthen my sentence. I wasn't sure I wanted to remain in this messed-up sector, but it was better than roaming around in the dead of winter. And winter was near. It was unfortunate that my release date would come at such a bad time in the season. Or maybe it was just fate testing me.

But back to my crime...one of them, that is.

Trespassing was what I was being held for presently. Uncertainty about what came next for me was why I stayed.

My most recent tribulations began with me waking up in a muddy ditch with a fractured leg. It had taken every ounce of strength in me to pull myself up or die of dehydration. Sector guards, who turned out to be from Legance, found me right before I was about to give up hope. Even though I couldn't walk and had twigs and sticks stuck in my hair, the guards held to the accusation

that I was purposefully trespassing within Legance's borders. The shady guards labeled me a spy and dragged me back to their sector to answer for my crime.

It had taken more time to gain back my short-term memories than it had taken to heal my leg, so of course, I had no reason to give my accusers about how I ended up on their land until weeks later.

Oddly enough, during my rehabilitation, Legance doctors diagnosed me with a traumatic brain injury. I could remember everything up until the moment before I ended up in the ditch. I didn't get it, and at times, I was frustrated with myself. It sometimes felt like something I wanted to say was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't get it out. In this case, my mind struggled to process my muddled thoughts.

The doctors had said the memory of how I'd sustained my injury would never return. The thing that happened to me must have happened so fast that my brain never had a chance to store memories at all. But this doctor was still optimistic and curious about my diagnosis to the point where he spoke to the powers-that-be, whoever they were, and got me a shorter sentence so he could *treat me*. And when I did gain my memories back, I wished that the images would've stayed buried.

I had been betrayed. Pushed off a cliff and left there to die.

Every time I thought about it, my heart seized up in my chest and panic set in. So I tried not to think about it. I only knew that I could never and would never trust again.

But now, I was here—where fate had brought me.

"Hey! You two!" the supervisor hollered once again, but this time, her anger was directed at another young lady who was crouched low to the ground next to a male. "Get to work! What do you think this is? A speed dating game?"

"Fuck off," the young lady yelled, jerking up her middle finger.

"That's it! Take this one to the confinement room," the supervisor commanded the other guards.

The lady just laughed as she was taken away. I wondered if she had planned that. Some people would do anything to avoid working. But to me, avoidance was only postponement.

Escaping, on the other hand...

Should I stay, or should I go?

Even now as I worked in the courtyard, everyone was preparing

for the colder months. No one liked getting caught in a blizzard. Soon, the sector would be locked down, and my chances of unmolested travels decreased with every passing day.

The person who pushed me wanted me dead. And I was sure that the survival group we were both a part of was long gone and probably had never even given a single thought as to why I hadn't reported for roll call that night. My group had probably forgotten about me, which was for the better. My past was dead.

I had two options.

I could complete the remainder of my community service and remain in Legance as a nobody.

Or I could risk it all and get the hell out of here.

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Chapter Two

Xenon

We weren't alone out here. I was sure of it.

In a city of ruins, one would think there would be no one around, but every hour or so we'd spot a scavenger scoping us out. They stayed clear of us. No one dared to cross paths with an Alpha, especially not a group of Alphas who were on a justice-seeking path. So, we left the nosey scavengers alone. They weren't our targets.

Over the city, the skies swarmed with gray clouds and the daylight was slowly fading away.

Our tents for the night were set up in the woods just outside the desolate city. All around me, I observed dilapidated structures and buildings that had not yet tumbled to the ground due to poor upkeep. But I knew the buildings would fall one day. All things fell...eventually.

Going through the rubble was dangerous, but I had a faculty for finding and recovering abandoned things. Too bad I had failed for many years in trying to find my long-lost brother.

Crouching down, I tossed aside a bundle of bricks and rummaged through a pile of old, rusted tools. I picked up a grease-smeared sign and read it aloud, "Hammer Hard Hardware Store." I chuckled, tucked the sign in my duffle bag, and then continued to sort through the mess.

Just about everything around me was dust and ashes. Thankfully, no human bones were lying beneath the rubble. Perhaps someone had already dragged them out and buried them all. Or perhaps the city was vacated some thirty years ago before all the weird shit started happening. Still, there were things left behind. Useful things. I wouldn't let them go to waste.

I collected what I could and walked back to our campsite. Most of the other Alphas and the dozens of betas who came along were asleep by now. Some were still up drinking and eating and horse-playing around.

Just as I was about to enter my tent, I spotted Axil Greyblood seated near the bank of a stream, looking out across the water. I threw the duffle bag in my tent and walked out toward him. He threw a rock into the stream, and we both watched it skip across the surface before finally sinking deep below.

I already knew what the distressed look on his face was about.

"You miss her," I said.

Axil looked up at me. "I'm not in a rut, if that's what you think."

Alphas who were in a state of rut were deemed unsuitable to make leadership decisions. It was why all who presented as Alphas were given the training necessary to control their urges. At any given time, an Alpha could be put in a position where they would need to become a leader for the clan. And it just so happened Axil had been put to the test over the last several weeks. Being left as the current Alpha-in-Charge meant Axil had responsibilities that other Alphas did not. He had no idea he would meet his soul mate and go into rut in the process of executing his duties. Yet, there was no sign Axil's judgment had been compromised once he found his mate. If anything, he became a better man because of it.

"I know you're not compromised. Otherwise, you'd be AWOL in a haze or something, right?" I joked.

He grinned. "Possibly. We took care of all that before I left."

I sat next to him on the ground. "I know that, too. It seemed I could hardly get a word in with you. You were always fucking her whenever I came around. What's the matter, then?"

"She's all I can think about. I shouldn't have left her so soon. She hardly knows anyone."

"She'll be fine. You set her up with everything she needed before you left. And she sent you off with courage as only an omega can," I said. "Besides, you have to get justice for her. We have to get justice for what her stupid half-brother did to us."

"You're right. And hey...not a word of this to anyone." He glanced at me sheepishly. "I'm not soft."

I chuckled. "Just be honest. You're pussy-whipped."

We scuffled playfully like brothers by the stream for a minute. Axil was part of my clan, and although he wasn't my brother by a birth mother, he was my blood brother. We grew up together. And he'd been by my side just as long as my true birth brother. We were both *of the blood*. Of a different kind. A different breed. And in this world, brothers were supposed to stick together.

“Honestly though, I’m jealous,” I admitted.

“For what? Your time will come. You’ll find your omega. And when you do, you’ll know.”

I shook my head. “Nah. No one’s going to put up with me. What I meant was, I guess we won’t go hunting together as often. That’s reason to be jealous of your omega. She has taken my hunting partner.”

Axil laughed. “We’ll still go hunting, X. You know that.”

“I’ve been thinking…” I started.

“About?”

“After this…mission. After this thing is done. I was thinking of taking a long trip. South maybe. Or East. I don’t know.”

“Is this about Zultan?” he asked.

I could never hide anything from Axil, so I just nodded.

“You know. I’ve never had a brother like that. All I had was you and my blood brothers, and now, I’ve got my beloved omega by my side. That’s it. I’m going to say this once again, but I don’t think Zultan is avoiding us because he’s disgruntled with us still. Years have passed. He can’t still be mad at you. How could he be? The memories he left behind must pain him. I honestly think he has moved on and found his way. I think he would want you to find your way as well. You can’t keep beating yourself up over what happened or how it happened.”

Leaning back until my back rested on the ground, I ran my hand through my hair and looked at the constellations of stars overhead.

“Things could’ve happened differently back then,” I mumbled, sighing.

“No. Things happened the way they were intended to happen. You can’t change anything. You can’t change destiny.”

Still, I wasn’t convinced.

It had been nearly three years since I had seen my brother. He was alive out there somewhere. Even if he never returned to this clan of Alphas and Mistacre, I wanted him to know that I made a mistake. I should’ve left with him when he asked.

I turned to look at Axil, who had leaned back, himself, and appeared to be half-asleep. “Hey, Axil?”

“Hmm?” he muttered.

“Not a word of this to anyone, alright?” I grinned, trying to make light of the situation. “I’m not soft, either.”

He grinned. “You have my word. I won’t say a word. But you’re

allowed to miss your big brother. No one will fault you for that."

Sometime after that, we must've drifted off to sleep right there on the ground, because when we woke up, the other Alphas were already folding up their tents and packing up.

It was time to head out. We had a dire mission to accomplish. A mission that was much more critical than finding a brother who didn't want to be found.

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Chapter Three

Meadow

On the very next day, my group was assigned a different post. This time—they packed us all in the greenhouse. I was no stranger to working for my meals and shelter, but I missed my freedom.

The girl who flipped our resource officer off yesterday approached me. “So, what’d you do?” she asked.

I was sort of surprised, because I’d never spoken with her before. Apparently, her time in solitary confinement was short-lived.

She knelt next to me in the dirt, ripped an oversized turnip from the earth, and tossed it in her basket.

“Nothing noteworthy,” I replied.

She pitched me a pointed stare. “You’ve barely said a word to any of us since they threw you into the boarding house. You’re the quietest one here, but from my experience, you’re exactly the type we all have to watch out for.”

“I guess that’s a compliment.” I shrugged and tugged up a couple of turnips before replying. “I’m not a big talker.”

“I think otherwise.”

“Well, you aren’t the first that doesn’t trust me, and sadly, I don’t think you’ll be the last.”

She put her hand on her hip. “Don’t take it personally, sweetheart. My so-called friends ratted me out for sneaking out of the sector. It’s why I’m here.”

I looked over my shoulder at the resource officer who was occupied on the far side of the greenhouse.

“You look like you’re planning something,” she said.

“I’m not,” I replied quickly.

Her grin leaned sideways, and she eyed me suspiciously as if she knew I was telling a lie. I was and I wasn’t, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Well, if you are planning something, I don’t blame you. This place is going downhill. Did you hear about what happened to Governor Arthur Wynnell?” she asked.

“He died recently. And there’s been a change in leadership. Right?”

She nodded. “Yes. His son, Leon, murdered him. And then, in front of everyone in attendance at the capitol meeting, Leon claimed it was self-defense. Members of his house staff say otherwise.”

“Why don’t they believe him?”

“They were always arguing publicly. And everyone knows that Leon wants to be governor. Since his father died before the end of his term, Leon gets to take over the sector without a fair election. Rumor has it that the other council members are heated about how he immediately took control.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and then when that girl they were supporting was kidnapped, things took a nosedive. She must’ve been something special, because there’s a rumor going around that Leon and his father were also arguing about her in the days leading up to his death.”

“Interesting,” I said. This sector was full of drama. Scandals of this caliber usually destroyed a sector from the inside out.

The girl continued spilling the beans. “They never tell us lowly citizens about anything that goes on between the council and their families, so it’s all speculation. We only know what they tell us. Since this thing happened, rumors have spread. All of the council members are on edge in fear of what Leon might do next. He has the power to do things that can turn this whole sector around...and not in a good way.”

“I’ve heard something like that, but I’m not from Legance, as you can tell. I’ve been here for less than a month. It doesn’t sound like the killing of your former governor was something random. Sounds like it might have been planned. How can you trust your leaders enough to stay here?”

She shrugged. “I don’t. But as you know, life is bad when you’re not in one of the sectors.”

I frowned. “Says who?”

She looked perplexed, and I knew she probably had a dozen more questions, but now wasn’t the time to ask. She could get us both in trouble.

She gestured with her chin, throwing her attention to a male wearing a worn-out sweater and dusty leather boots. “That guy over

there...you know, the ginger...he says they caught you for trespassing."

I swallowed. "He's right. We were brought in at the same time, but I don't know him. He was caught stealing. Or at least that's what they said."

"Well, in his case, he did commit the crime. He's not even from Legance. He claims he's from Nova and got separated from his scouting group."

I looked up at her. "Nova?"

Nova wasn't far from here, and I'd heard some promising things about living there. Their leader wasn't as harsh as some of the other sector heads.

"Yeah. Have you been there?" she asked.

"Probably."

"Have they tested you yet?"

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You know...to see if you can have babies."

"Yes. I'm sure they have."

"Which is it? Yes, or you're sure they have?" she asked with a ridiculing stare.

I didn't want to tell her everything just yet and let on to the fact that I had been through many tests because of my prior condition. One of them included a fertility test, which was probably the prime reason why I was tossed into reform school instead of prison. Or worse, kicked back into the ditch they dragged me from.

"I'm fertile, if that's what you're asking. I was tested long ago in my home sector," I said.

"Home sector?"

"Yes. The sector I was born in."

"Aren't you afraid they'll hook you up with some doofus scumbag and you'll never see your home again?"

I shook my head. "Of course not."

She seemed confused by my answer.

"I should've known you wouldn't be afraid. You don't look like the type of person to just lay down and take it. Unless..." Her eyes brightened. "You plan to be long gone from here before that happens. You plan to leave...to escape—"

"My plans are irrelevant. They're just hopes and dreams. After all, we all have plans, don't we?" I had to stop her from speculating aloud. There were ears everywhere.

In a low voice, she inquired, “Can I ask you a personal question? Are you one of them…travelers?”

“Travelers? I don’t know anything about travelers.” I got up, toting my harvest basket of turnips to the next row.

“Then what’s that mark on your back. When we were in the showers, I saw it. You wear the mark of a traveler. Don’t think I don’t know what that is. I’ve seen the mark before. I sneak out all the time. It just so happens that I got caught last time. Well, I didn’t get caught. My shady-ass friends got caught and then ratted me out. But guess whose parents couldn’t afford the penalty money? I don’t need reform. I need freedom. So, what’s the mark for?”

“Look, I’m not a traveler. If I was, I’d be with them now.” But I wasn’t because someone intentionally tried to kill me.

“Were you with them before, by any chance? Because why else would you have that mark on you?”

The girl wasn’t going to quit. She knew more than most. And she asked questions like a lawyer. Truth was, I *had* lived with travelers because I thought I had no other choice.

“It’s a long story,” I told her.

“That mark on your back—”

“Is just a tattoo. Don’t you have them?” I asked.

“Yes, but—”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Bridget,” she said.

“I’m Meadow.”

“Cool. So, do you know any spells?”

I breathed outward. She wasn’t going to quit. “Not all travelers perform spells or rituals. Some of us are quite normal,” I informed her.

Her eyes widened. “So you are one of them?”

“I’m just a trespasser.” When I moved to the next row of root vegetables, she didn’t follow me this time. I was glad. I didn’t want to be grilled about my past. I wanted to put my old life behind me. But the tattoo on my back would scar me forever.

There was no place I could go where the symbol didn’t mean something to those who knew what it represented.

Just as I was about to bend down to harvest some radishes, something vibrated the ground, and then a loud boom erupted and clouds of dust floated up into the sky. The smoke came from somewhere inside the walls.

After a moment of silence in which everyone stopped what they were doing to turn to the source of the noise, people started to panic. As I looked out toward the courtyard, men, women, and children darted in every direction. It took me a moment to realize they were running from some bigger threat. Everyone looked frightened.

"What's going on?" a guy asked.

A guard burst into the greenhouse and yelled, "Our sector is breached!"

"Everyone, just stay put," the resource officer instructed. "Henry will go check." She ushered Henry out through the opening. "No need to panic. The perimeter guards would never let intruders inside our sector."

"But looks like they are past the perimeter. They're already inside," I corrected.

The resource officer frowned. "Grab your baskets! We'll head back to the boarding house. We—"

There was a second and third explosion, followed by the sound of rocks tumbling down. And then came the screams.

Something was amiss.

The perimeter guards hadn't done their jobs.

The sector *was* breached.

Who on earth would break into a sector in such a way? Who on Earth could send people running like hell for their lives?

I got my answer before my workgroup made it back to the boarding house.

The Alphas were here.

There was no mistaking this clan. *The Uncaged.*

The men were easily identifiable. Not just by the inkings on their flesh, but also by their huge, solid bodies and wide girth. Some of them were even bigger than bears. The majority of them were as strong as oxen. They weren't entirely human. The uncaged Alphas were males with altered DNA.

Most of them carried chains hung across their shoulders or worn like belts, clearly repping their clan and living up to their moniker. Many also wore quivers, arrows, and arches on their backs. Unlike the Legance guards, they didn't have guns or ammo. No. Those things ran out. The rumors were that they could dodge bullets with super speed and strength. And if they happened to get shot, they healed extraordinarily fast.

Legance guards seemed hesitant to use their firearms with citizens darting in front of them. One guard dropped his pistol and ran away screaming with an arrow stuck straight through his palm. Another put away his firearm and helped residents run to safety instead.

My heart beat like a drum. My legs moved like putty, and my eyes could not look away from the chaos unfolding within borders that were supposed to be impenetrable. But to a clan of Alphas on a rampage, walls were like glass. Had these savages returned to their old ways of destroying and raiding? After all, they said history was bound to repeat itself over and over again.

I witnessed as one Alpha dragged a guard to the ground with his thick chain and knocked him unconscious. A second Alpha took the gun right out of his hand, tossed the weapon into a burlap sack, and then they left him there.

In my mind, I heard the voice of the resource officer calling for me to hurry up, but I had tuned her out a while ago.

I looked at the three-story boarding house that resembled a prison. A sad reality awaited me there in a ten-by-ten-foot room. Just as Bridget had said earlier. We didn't need reform. We needed freedom.

I looked away beyond all the chaos at the setting sun above the sector. The walls were down. Nothing was stopping me from walking right out of Legance.

"Meadow!" This time it was Bridget who was calling me. "Come inside the boarding house before they hurt you. Don't you see those savages?"

I took one look at her and shook my head. "I'm not worried about the savages."

"You're going to leave, aren't you?" she asked.

"I don't belong here," I whispered.

She rushed toward me. "Take me with you. Please. I can't stay here. I don't belong, either."

Other detainees from the boarding house must have seen us stalling and speaking in contemplation. They stopped as well.

"Let's all get out of there. What are we waiting on?" a guy inquired.

He was right. What exactly was I waiting on?

I turned away from the boarding house and hustled with purpose towards freedom.

“Stop them! Stop those detainees,” our resource officer yelled.

I didn’t turn around to see how many others followed me. It didn’t matter. Many of us had already made up our minds. Soon, we’d all be free.

The resource officer was still yelling—yelling for nothing. No one would stop us. No one *could* stop us. The guards were already occupied trying to protect a sector from savages.

On the way out of the sector, I spotted an unconscious guard. As I knelt on the ground to unclip his knife and knife pouch from his waist, Bridget asked, “Where should we go?”

“This is dangerous. If you’re not prepared to risk it, then stay here with your families. All of you.” I stood up and looked at them. “Don’t risk it if paradise is what you seek. Nothing like that exists anymore. Not in the sectors, anyway.”

“Then we’ll travel, like you,” Bridget said.

I secured the knife pouch to my waist and moved onward. This time, only Bridget and a few others followed. The majority had heeded my warnings and turned back around.

“You have family here. Why would you leave?” I asked as she tried to keep up.

“They’re not my real parents. They adopted me from the sector orphanage. I’ve felt like a third wheel ever since my little brother was born. I’ll never follow the rules here. *I don’t conform.* I think it’ll be best if I just go.”

Her words resonated with me and a flash of memories, although blurred, overtook me. But I couldn’t dwell on my past now, so I suppressed the vision, allowing only the current chain of events to be my focus.

“Hurry, guys. Someone’s coming this way,” a guy behind us warned.

“Move fast and don’t look back,” I told them.

Because I wouldn’t. I would never look back.

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Chapter Four

Meadow

We raced away from the chaos toward an uncertain fate. The setting sun was a reminder that darkness was closing in on us. If we wanted to be far away from Legance before the savages left, we'd have to move out quickly.

While only meters from a blown-out section of border wall, I was distracted by a high-pitched scream. I wasn't sure why I stopped, but I did.

Just three yards away from me was a girl trying her best to free herself from a big, brutish-looking man. She kicked and screamed as he tried to grab her legs.

I had heard about the Alphas tormenting and sometimes taking women who appeased them, but I had never actually seen anything like what I saw at that moment. I felt compelled to act. To help.

"Meadow, let's go," Bridget urged.

After taking my lead, all four escapees had stolen weapons and backpacks they had snatched from unconscious guards.

I glanced toward the sunset and straight out into the dense forest and then back at the young woman kicking and screaming for her life.

While shoving Bridget toward freedom, I told them, "Go. Just go. Don't stop. Don't wait for me. Tell the others to run. If you can make it to the Sanrey River, you might be able to catch a ferry to Providencia or Nova. Don't expect to sail for free. To pay your fare, you'll need to scavenge along the way. *Go.*"

Shots rang out, and we both jumped.

She gasped. "What about you?"

"Don't worry about me. I can survive. You have to leave. Now!" I shoved her toward the forest.

She took off behind the two guys and the other girl.

"Stop! No!" the girl screamed again.

I turned my sights on the bully attacking the poor girl. Her ripped blouse was on the ground nearby.

I spotted a shovel propped against an old wooden shed. I picked it up and without hesitation marched toward the savage. I wasn't surprised to see the inkings on his back prominently displaying the crowned skull of a king. This brute was an Alpha and a savage, but neither were excuses for him to attempt to hold captive and rape an innocent woman.

I swung the steel bottom of the shovel and knocked him so hard that he stumbled several feet away from the girl. The girl didn't waste a moment. She took one look at me and then at the injured Alpha and took off. She ran in the direction I hoped to go.

"You little bitch!" the brute spat. There was a fresh, open gash on the side of his head. Blood dripped down his face.

"You big, cowardly savage!"

He grimaced with malice. "I'll show you a savage."

I tossed the shovel at his feet just as he reached me, causing him to stumble yet again. I used the opportunity to flee from him. I was fast, but he was big. His legs ate up the distance between us in no time, and soon, I was pinned to the ground by a body that seemed to be made of boulders. I struggled beneath him. His blood and sweat dripped on me. He dragged me behind some bushes.

"You're an omega, aren't you?" he hissed. "You sure do smell like one. I'll soon find out if you are. I haven't mounted a bitch in weeks, and you have just let the other one get away."

"Get off me!"

"Fighting won't help. You should have minded your business. Why take a common human when I can take an omega?" He drove his thigh up between my legs. "You are an omega, aren't you? Don't try to resist. Let me mount you and find out. I've got just what you need."

"Mount this, you fucking animal." I buried the knife into the back of his leg.

He howled like a feral beast and then grabbed me so tightly around the neck I thought he'd choke the life right out of me.

"That will be the last time you draw blood from me, wench," he growled and squeezed tighter.

I began seeing red, white, and...doubles. Then I saw two savages. One behind the other.

The brute was so focused on trying to render me unconscious that he didn't see the second Alpha coming for him.

The second Alpha grabbed the brute and yanked him upward.

When he hit the ground some twelve feet away, he struggled to stand again, but finally managed to limp back toward the second Alpha.

I clutched my throat, fighting for breath.

"Hey there," the second Alpha said as he offered me a hand up. He seemed sincere, but I still couldn't trust him. I shrank back, but I couldn't look away.

The second Alpha was muscular and tall. His sun-tanned skin glistened with sweat. He was gorgeous, in a rugged kind of way. His eyes were bluish-gray, and his shoulder-length black mane had a streak of silver on one side. Just like the other brute, he was buff. The air seemed to vibrate around him.

He reached for me again. On his upper left arm, he wore the symbol of the uncaged—*the crowned skull of their dead king*.

No. I wouldn't fall for it. He didn't want to help me. This was all an act. He was the same as the rest of them. An Alpha. Either way, they were all the same. I couldn't trust anyone now. Not anymore. Not if I wanted to live.

"Don't touch me," I warned, holding up the same bloody knife I used on the brute. I scrambled away from him and tried to regain my bearings. I didn't have a clear view of my escape route anymore.

"Calm down, little warrior," he said in a deep, baritone voice. "I won't hurt you."

The other brute hopped over, dragging his injured leg along the ground, and pointed at me. "This bitch must pay. She stabbed me. I demand her punishment. Let me do it."

"No, Balto. If you wish for the chance to punish her, you have to kill me first."

And just like that, the only people stopping my escape were two savage Alphas.

One determined to kill me, and the other...

Well, who knew what he wanted?

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Chapter Five

Xenon

Balto was pissed. His blood pooled on the ground from his injury.

I would've been fed up too if someone had stabbed me in the leg and left me conscious to feel the pain. And that was exactly what the female with the enchanting hazel eyes had done. Even now, she held the bloody knife in her hand as if she wouldn't hesitate to strike again. With the way she held the weapon and kept a fighter's stance, I could tell she wasn't afraid to defend herself by any means necessary. And she didn't seem afraid of Balto—or me—at all.

"Stand back, X!" Balto hissed and spat on the ground. "She tried to kill me. She marked me. Let me teach her a lesson."

"I can't let you do that. As I said the first time, you'll have to lay me out to get to her."

"Huh?" Balto grunted. "You'll stick up for this piece of pussy over me?"

I was serious. I wasn't about to let him do something he would regret, no matter how justified he felt it might be. And I wasn't about to let a man strike a woman who was only trying to defend herself. Sure, she had marked him, but I'd known Balto long enough to guess that he might have instigated a fight.

His eyes were as red as a blood moon during a lunar eclipse. I felt his anger, his rage, his pain...

He reminded me of someone very close to me. He reminded me of what an Alpha could become if they couldn't keep their ruts or rages in check. Yet, there was no honor in an Alpha being bested by a woman—a common human.

I glanced over my shoulder at her and sniffed. Maybe I was wrong. She didn't look common, and she certainly didn't smell common.

"You hesitate to strap her and teach her a lesson. Then allow me!" Balto charged.

No matter how determined he was to mow through me, I couldn't let that happen.

By charging at me, his challenge was already made clear. I couldn't back down. I threw my bundle of chains to the ground and prepared for a full-on attack.

"Come on then," I replied.

Right when I thought I'd have to take down one of my own to save the female, Balto stopped short and doubled over. The wound on the back of his leg had opened up even more, and blood was pouring down his ankles.

He grimaced and grunted. "You better be glad I can't move, X. I was going to put you down and punish that bitch." He sat on the ground, ripped a piece of fabric from his shirt, and wrapped it tightly around his leg.

"Enough of the nonsense." I held out my hand, offering to help him up while saying, "Might I remind you that we didn't come here to satisfy your rutting urges. You are out of control. You should've taken care of that before we left. That was the deal. If you are compromised in any way, you need to abort and go back home."

"She tried to kill me," he insisted and then swatted my hand away and lifted himself off the ground.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Axil came rushing from the campsite. He stood between us and asked, "X? Balto? What is all this about?" When neither of us said anything, Axil's gaze shifted briefly to the nameless female beside us. He frowned and exhaled sharply. "I thought you knew better, X. Get yourselves together. You look like you want to murder someone, Moonblood."

Upon hearing Axil use my surname, I dropped my defenses and unclenched my fists. Axil—or any other Alpha for that matter—rarely called another Alpha by their surname unless it was to remind them of their nature and their vices.

I was *of the blood*. And a Moonblood by birth. If not kept in check, the rage inside me could overpower my judgment. I was lucky enough to have learned at a young age how to never become the monster, but some of us weren't so lucky. Like my brother, perhaps it was too late for Balto, who was a mix between a Moonblood and a Nightblood. The tempers of Nightbloods seemed to flair without warning, no matter the phase of the moon. But as for Balto Nightblood, his temper had combusted.

"What happened? Why were you fighting?" Axil asked me.

"Ask Balto. He started it."

"That other dick-teasing bitch flashed her tits at me and then

tried to run off. Then this here devious cunt stabbed me in the back of the leg! They were probably all in it together, trying to gang up on me," Balto fussed.

"Then keep your filthy hands to yourself, *uncaged savage*!" the female shouted back at him. It looked like she wanted to say more, but loud warning sirens began to blare, startling us all.

"Well, none of us has the time to finish it now. This sector is under lockdown, and we have a governor to find. We'll talk later, X." Axil turned away. "And you'll explain yourself, Balto, right after you get your leg stitched up. This isn't a rutting hunt. If you won't behave, I'll send you back to Mistacre. That goes for you too, X." He assisted the injured Balto across the open field into the pending darkness where we had already set up camp just outside the sector.

With Axil and Balto out of sight, I turned around to find the female with the knife still clutched in her fist.

I was so mesmerized by her beauty that it drowned out the blaring sirens. I forgot for a moment what it was I was supposed to be doing. Tracking, yes. I was supposed to be tracking.

In perfect, almost uniform waves, the female's thick black hair hung loosely down her back. Her face was round and her skin was flawless. Her thick, hooded eyelashes fluttered as she looked straight up at me.

"You can put down your weapon. Nothing else is gonna happen to you," I told her. "Hand it to me." I held out my hand.

In a display of defiance, she wiped the bloody blade of the knife against her pants and then shoved it back into the pouch. Then, she clipped it to her pant loop.

"I'm not handing over anything. I'm not stupid," she hissed.

"Fine." I shrugged. "Keep it."

She looked around and then stared at the big gate near the front of the community and at the crumbling stones where my clan had commanded some betas to stand guard. Placing her palm against her forehead, she exclaimed, "Fuck! Because of your jerky green giant friend who seems to have a brain the size of a pea, I've missed my freaking opportunity."

"Your opportunity?"

"Every other gate is probably guarded by now."

"You were trying to escape?"

She bit her bottom lip.

"Do you live in this place?" I asked when she didn't answer.

She spun on her heel and started walking the other way.

"Wait! If you want out, I can help you."

She stopped but continued to face the other way. "I don't even know you."

"No. But you do know one thing."

She turned around with her arms folded across her chest. "And what's that?"

"I saved you from the jerky green giant."

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. "Are you kidding me? I was prepared to cut him until he bled dry. You saved *him*, not *me*. Let's get that clear."

I couldn't help but grin. She was gutsy and tough. But was it all an act? Her skin looked soft to the touch, and her eyes looked far too innocent to want to follow through with killing a man. And then there was her scent—which was sweeter than anything I had ever imagined.

"I don't trust you. You're one of them," she said.

I nodded. "I am one of them."

"You're an Alpha," she muttered as her gaze slowly shifted to the ground and then back at me.

"Yes."

"What are you all doing here? Why have you come here? And why are you terrorizing people?"

"My clan has temporarily taken the sector. We're here for Leon, the governor."

"Everyone keeps talking in whispers about him and how he murdered his father. What has this governor done to your clan?"

"Something terrible. We must capture him. No one can leave or come in until we do. No traders. No outsiders. No one. Capturing the governor is our mission. Nothing else."

She frowned. "I don't give a shit whether you capture him or not. I can't stay here. I'm not going back to that boarding house, either."

"Boarding house? What's that?" I asked.

When her fiery gaze shied away from me, I sensed that something was wrong and that she needed help. She was desperate for it. I could see it in her eyes. I could smell it in the air.

"You're afraid," I said.

"I'm not. I just prefer to live my life on my terms," she replied.

"You're not afraid of me?" I asked.

She studied me carefully. “I’ve seen Alphas before. I’ve even spoken to one. That’s how I know about the skull marking. I thought it was just a myth until I saw a guy wearing one.”

“Where else have you seen an Alpha?”

“Does it matter?” She sighed and shook her head. It looked as if she was about to turn and run off.

“Fine. I’ll help you.”

Her eyes brightened. “You will?”

I moved closer to her. Before she could protest, I took her arm—both of them—and tied her wrists together with a short rope. She seemed surprised that I had pulled off such a quick move.

“What the hell?” she exclaimed.

“You have a potty mouth, little warrior.” I picked up my bundle of chains from the ground and then instructed, “Come.”

“Come? What do you think I am? A pet?” she protested. “I said I wanted to get out. That does not require putting me on a leash.”

“If you want my help to get out of this place, you will come.”

“Where are you taking me?”

I didn’t answer as I brought her to the temporary camp where a few dozen other men and women were being held next to a tree. Axil had already ordered about a half dozen betas to guard the hostages. We’d release them when we were satisfied with the outcome. Otherwise, we’d just keep collecting them until Leon showed his face.

“What is this?” she demanded.

“You will stay here until I return. If you want my help…” I told her.

“You tricked me,” she said.

I grinned. “You don’t believe that now, do you?”

Axil was nearby rounding up the other Alphas, and soon, he’d notice I wasn’t in the group.

“I have to go now. Stay put.” I pointed at the spot where she stood.

Her lips parted to say something, but I walked off. I nudged Jeffrey, one of the betas. “No one is to touch this one. See my ropes. I have strapped her. She is my captive. And do not let her go anywhere with anyone. I will deal with her when I return.”

Jeffrey nodded.

“Hey!” she called.

I waved at her and walked away to join the other Alphas.

When I entered the circle, Axil announced, “My brothers, Leon Wynnell has not shown his face, so it is time to pull this coward out of hiding.”

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Chapter Six

Xenon

“So, this is him? This is the dumb fuck that killed his own father?” Ketil Nightblood bellowed as he held one end of the chain that secured Leon Wynnell, the new governor of Legance, to the spot.

Xonar Greyblood held the other end of the chain while myself, Axil, and a handful of other Alphas took part in the interrogations in some kind of sitting room.

All the maids, servants, and a host of other house staff had already abandoned the Wynnell mansion, leaving Leon, his mother, and a few other siblings inside. The sector was locked down for now, and the guards were ordered to stand down in order to save their governor’s life. But with the way he was acting and inciting the other Alphas, someone was bound to shut him up permanently. And to that end, I believed we would be doing his constituents a favor. He had become a burden to them.

“How did you fleabags get inside my sector?” Leon’s teeth were coated in blood, and two were missing.

“That is not the issue,” Axil spoke, running a hand through his hair.

He was already annoyed and aggravated. I wondered just how much of Leon’s shit Axil could take before he broke.

“Did you have help?” Leon spat blood on his marble floors right where he kneeled.

Before we marched in, everything was perfect, shined to the nines. Now everything was *stained by savages*—as the common humans would say. Our muddy tracks covered the floors. Things were touched, broken into, and moved about. Our fingerprints would likely be spotted for days after we were gone. But of course, we planned to leave an impression. One which would live up to our notorious reputations.

“Give me the name of the person or persons who helped you breach my sector, and I’ll give you whatever it is you want…whatever it takes for you to leave, of course,” Leon said.

Axil wrapped his dirty fingers around Leon's neck and squeezed tightly. "You are in no position to initiate a bargain."

Leon's mother wailed from her chair in a corner of the room and continued to beg for us to have mercy on her son. We asked her to leave the room, but she insisted on staying with him. No matter what people said about us, none of us would ever cause harm to a woman of her status. We all wondered why she was trying to save him. He had murdered her husband in cold blood. There was no saving him. How could he find redemption after that?

"Do you even know who I am?" Axil asked him.

"You're the one who breached the sector the first time, aren't you?"

"Then you know why I'm here this time?"

"I have a hunch. The first time you stole a thing. A girl. Karis. I'm sure you've made use of her. How is she, by the way?"

Axil growled. "My patience is thin. I suggest you leave her name out of your mouth if you wish to live another second. She has nothing to do with this."

"Oh, she does...and she doesn't..."

"You killed her father, *your* father," Axil stated.

"It needed to be done. How else would I have taken the lead here? The people were anxious to get rid of him. They just didn't want to hurt his feelings. He lived a good life. He had a good run as governor. And he was a good father. So, understand why I did this. I did it for the family. For the sector," Leon exclaimed.

Axil recoiled. "We don't understand your ways. We don't want to."

"It wasn't too long ago that you savages used to fight amongst yourselves." He laughed. "Calling yourselves Alphas is a joke. In my sector, there is only one Alpha. *Me.*"

"You are no Alpha." Ketil yanked on the chain around Leon's neck, applying immense pressure to the man's jugular. Ketil then leaned down and whispered, "You're a common ass-fuck. It's why you're on your knees bent over like a whore."

That seemed to get a rise out of Leon, and he tried to stand up. He was slammed down to his knees once more.

"Down!" Ketil ordered. "Or we will rip your limbs apart."

"*Testy*," Leon rasped. "You all are mad about what I did, aren't you? Well, I did what I had to do. You all got in the way of my plans. And you know what? You savages are a real piece of work,

coming in here and leaving a nasty stain on everything. Everything you touch turns to shit. So I blew up the tanks. Yeah, I did it. But those tanks would have turned to shit, too. You're all just pieces of shit rummaging through the trash."

This time, it was Xonar who did the assaulting, backhanding Leon so hard he fell backward.

Axil jerked his thumb in an upward gesture. "Get him back up."

"Just kill me now," Leon croaked. "I know you all want to. But I stand by what I said. This was all just bad timing. I wasn't trying to pick a fight with stray dogs."

I shook my head. "All lies. You knew what you were doing, coward. You destroyed the tanks to try to take us out. You blew your father's brains out, and then you blew Stefan's brains out just so you could rule a bigger sector. After realizing we were after the tanks and that we wouldn't back down, you blew them up knowing we would keep fighting for them if they still existed."

"Now there's nothing left to fight for," Leon replied.

"You're wrong," I stated.

"Stefan had no business making deals with you, anyway. You're not part of the trade alliance between the sectors, so you shouldn't benefit from any resources within them. When I found out what Stefan had done, going behind my father's back and making agreements with the likes of you, he said he'd make it right. He didn't want my father to know about his side deals. And he did make it right for a time, but you savages really can't take the hint," Leon replied.

"So, it was you who forced Stefan to renege on his deal with us?" Axil asked.

Leon gave a short, mirthless laugh. "I didn't have to do any forcing at all, rather, I just persuaded him. You see, within every family is a secret." A crooked grin marred his face as he glanced at Axil.

"We know this all too well. You must have known when you shot Stefan that Karis was your half-sister."

Leon nodded. "Oh, I did, but that is not the secret I was referring to. This secret is something so scandalous that he would have never wanted my poor father to find out. And my father never did, and now he's dead...so, maybe he and Stefan are in prostitute-paradise together. What's that saying...birds of a feather..."

Axil frowned, folding his arms over his chest. "I don't have time

for games."

He wasn't the only one getting impatient. I rocked from foot to foot, itching to squeeze the living daylights out of this guy.

"I'm not playing games," Leon responded.

"Then you're wasting time," Axil spat.

"I don't remember asking any of you to come here. We were just planning the biggest funeral of the decade, and you came in while we were unaware you were even on your way. Many important people from different sectors will be here soon, and they'll be rather disturbed to see savages within our walls. You see, my father was a man of great importance. He was a great leader. He was a natural leader. That's what they said about him, as if he were some superhero or something." Leon rolled his eyes.

Axil and I exchanged glances.

Leon had no idea that his human father carried within him a suppressed Alpha gene. It was probably why Arthur Wynnell was regarded as such a natural-born leader. And as a result of the adulterous flings of Arthur and another suppressed omega, a child—who presented as an omega herself later in life—was conceived. That child was Karis. Yet, it wasn't our place to tell him any of this. It didn't matter. Leon was no Alpha. He wasn't gifted with the gene. He was just *common*.

"Yeah? Well, we don't want to meet a bunch of privileged jerks with sticks up their asses while we're here, so get on with this family secret. What do you know of Stefan?" Axil demanded.

"You see, Stefan had a problem with keeping it in his pants."

"Yeah? *And?*" Xonar urged.

"What are you trying to tell us? Did he ass-fuck you? Is that why you shot him?" Ketil blurted.

"No, you idiot. You must have known he was fucking around with some of those savage-loving sluts in your village. You have humans in your clan, don't you?" Leon looked between us like he expected us to be shocked that people in our village had sex with whoever they wanted.

"Listen, you dumb-fuck. Let's get to the point," Axil started. "You blew up two oil tanks that could have provided for an entire sector for two winters. That was nearly a year's worth of work down the fucking drain. You could've taken the oil instead of wasting it like an idiot." He yanked Leon up by the collar and made him stand. "I don't give a shit who Stefan was fucking. He was

never fated to touch Karis, and that is all that matters to me. Maybe you and your father had issues with who he was fucking for whatever reason, but what fucking difference does it make to us? That does not explain or justify your reason for setting fire to oil tanks and putting hundreds of families in jeopardy of losing their lives and their homes. You will pay for this. Here. And now."

Leon gave an imprudent, short laugh. "I don't deal with savages. I wouldn't pay you a penny even if they were still worth something. I should have known you would think nothing of how all the women in your village are sluts. Taking after her mother, it's no wonder that Karis allegedly put up no fight when you took her from here. She too is a savage-loving slut who has no business bearing the Wynnell name *ever*. She has probably already opened her legs just like her mother taught her for all these savages standing right here in this room. She is now *useless*."

The sound of bones cracking filtered through the air when Axil's fist met with Leon's jaw. Gravity took over, and the force sent Leon sailing back several feet. He landed hard on the marble floor but remained conscious, albeit disoriented. He didn't stay conscious for long. No one could stop Axil as he proceeded to pound Leon with his fist until he passed out.

By the time he passed out, Leon's mother had risen from her chair, begging once again for mercy for her son. He deserved none.

What man would kill his own father?

What man would shoot a friend in the back?

What man would turn his back on his flesh and blood?

Leon's mother covered her unconscious, idiotic son with her body. "Please. Don't kill him. We will give you anything you want. He will fix this. I'll make sure of it. Please..."

Axil's fist was bloody, and his knuckles were bruised to the bone. Although he was known as one of the calmest, level-headed Alphas in the bunch, he seemed distracted by his need to make it clear to Leon that he should never speak ill of Karis again.

Axil spoke to Leon's mother. "Ma'am, you have enabled your son all these years. And now he has killed your husband. As for Legance, the wolves have descended. Your sector is vulnerable. We have breached it two times over. With your son at the head of the table, I don't see a promising future for Legance. Enemies will prey on his weakness. As his mother, I'm sure you know what that is. We will go now. But we will be back tomorrow. He must pay."

With tears in her eyes, she nodded quickly. “He will. I promise.”

Axil sighed and then glanced over at me. He was too fueled by rage to trust his judgment. I nodded, seconding his decision to leave them in peace for now.

We left the Wynnell mansion in disorder and disarray that night. Soon, we would leave the sector with a much worse reputation than we already had, but we wouldn’t leave here empty-handed.

Someone else wanted to leave this dreadful sector, and I was going to help her. After the sheer idiocy I just witnessed, I wouldn’t leave my worst enemy in this place.

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Chapter Seven

Meadow

It was almost dark when the Alphas came back. As they walked up, I noticed they weren't as riled up as they were when they left the first time. I almost wondered if they had made peace or provoked even more tension with the sector leaders.

I just didn't have time to ponder their fates. If someone didn't release me from this rope now, it would only be a matter of time before Legance guards came to claim the hostages—and me.

I had only seen the man who saved me from being punished by that angry jerky giant once—just once, and I was already looking for him among the other Alphas.

I couldn't get the guy's image out of my mind. No one had ever helped me without wanting something in return, and I had every reason to believe that this guy was no different.

Just when I thought he'd leave me by the side of the tree, a big shadow loomed over me. His scent was husky with a tinge of sweetness, almost like sage.

I looked up to meet his gaze. His stormy blue-gray eyes were filled with mystery and intrigue. Nothing in them told me he was about to go bat shit crazy like the other guy had.

My mother told me about the Alphas and the uncaged when I was a little girl. Her story differed from the stories I heard as I grew older. To my mother, the Alphas were a unique breed of men who were just misunderstood. And because of that, people feared them and spread awful rumors. As my life went on, the reputations of these Alphas grew sour with claims that these men had done unspeakable things. They were associated with violence and unrest because of their reputation for raiding and plundering. And tonight, they had lived up to that reputation.

It wasn't like I had a choice now. Well, I did have a choice. Two, actually: take my chances in Legance, or leave here with the uncaged.

Looking down at me, the stormy-eyed Alpha grinned. "You're

still here."

"If I had a second set of hands and an invisible cloak, I wouldn't be."

"Hmmm. Such things don't exist. Instead of trying to wish the impossible into existence, you could've just asked Jeff to untie your ropes. He probably would've done it for you," he shot back.

"You're just teasing me. I heard when you told him not to let me go. Some of the others were allowed to go into the communal tent where the warm fire is, but you commanded him to leave me here," I said while standing.

"Because I have claimed you as my personal captive. No one would dare steal from me," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. Now that you're back, I'd appreciate it if you live up to your end of the bargain by untying the ropes *you* bound me with and letting me go like you agreed." I thrust out my wrists at him.

"It'll be pitch black soon. I don't know anyone who can find their way in the dark," he said.

"I can manage. Just get me out of this sector, and I'll be on my way."

"Don't be so quick that you're willing to make a grave mistake," he warned.

"Untie me." I shoved my wrists at him again.

"No," he said. "Come."

"Come. *Come*," I mocked. "Is that all you ever say?"

This time when he grinned, it was different. His eyes searched the length of my body suggestively. "No one's ever complained to me about being commanded to come."

I sighed. "Great. Before, I was dealing with a belligerent giant jerk, and now I'm dealing with a horny big fellow."

He choked on a snort. "I'm insulted."

I dropped my arms in front of me. "Look, I'm not what you think I am. I know how to survive out there."

He arched an eyebrow and studied me. "I'm sure you do. That's why I think you'll agree with me when I tell you that it's best to travel at first light, considering what happened here. You're not the only one who wanted to escape, and you're not the only one who *has* escaped. You don't know who's out there. You don't know what's out there."

I shivered as a cold breeze spread across my arms. Thank God I

had my coat with me, but it still wasn't enough. But I'd rather stand and freeze out in the cold than be worked like a mule for some crime I didn't even commit. I had a chance to escape. And I lost it. Ugh!

As I was mentally beating myself up, he untied my ropes just as quickly as he had tied them. I rubbed my wrists and looked through the darkness behind him.

"My tent is this way," he said, nodding his head in the opposite direction.

He started walking away. I followed him like it was the most natural thing for me to do.

Just as he said, he had a tent not too far from the group. There were a couple more tents in sight that looked as if they were occupied by other oversized Alphas.

"What did you guys do? Set up tents, then raid the sector? How did the governor here not know you were about to raid them?"

"No, we just raided the sector while our tents were set up for us. Now that we're here, we're not going anywhere until we get justice." I must have looked puzzled before he added, "We work as a unit. We're not just Alphas. We have betas and common humans in our ranks as well. This was a planned strategic move on your sector. We knew what we were doing."

"As I said, it's not my sector."

"Yeah, that's right. How could I forget?" He held the opening of the tent aside. "You can camp with me here. Beats freezing to death out there, yes?"

He was right. There wasn't enough time to flee and find adequate shelter until the next sunrise. Reluctantly, I slipped inside.

Because of his height, the Alpha had to kneel on the soft furs laid across the ground. He had to have been at least seven-feet-tall. When his arm brushed against mine, I felt an electric charge travel up my spine. He must've felt the vibe too, because he caught my gaze and held it. His nose flared as he leaned in closer.

"If you try anything with me, I will cut you."

"I do not doubt that you would, little warrior." He began gathering things needed to dig a depression right outside the tent to make a small fire. "Tell me, how did you plan to survive with just the clothes on your back?"

"You look at me and you think I'm helpless just because I'm a woman," I said and then took the tinder and kindling from him and

proceeded to make a fire from the raw materials he spread out near the tent. In just under five minutes, I had started a fire.

"You are most certainly not from Legance," he said, sitting back in the tent. "And with those skills, I can tell you've been taught by a pro."

"I learned when I was young." I watched the flames flickering outside the tent.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"I see no need for small talk. I'll be gone tomorrow," I said.

"Fair enough." He pulled out a big jar sealed tight with some kind of stew or soup inside. "I hope you like mystery stew."

I giggled and then covered my mouth in an attempt to hide my amusement.

"No, really. I made it myself but I forgot to label the thing. I don't know if it's chicken, or venison, or just plain roadkill, so when I finally got around to putting a name on it..."

I smiled. "It is better than nothing."

His gaze roved and lazily appraised me. "I'm Xenon Moonblood, or X if you like."

I let a few moments go by before I responded.

"Meadow. Carver."

"*Meadow.* Like nature. Beautiful."

With his steady gaze melting into me with silent expectation, there was nothing I could do to hide the blush rising up my neck and across my cheeks. Rumor was that Alpha men had this kind of effect on women. No matter how hard I tried to pretend he didn't faze me, I was no exception to the rumor. One thing I did know how to do was keep my legs closed and my mind on the plan.

"Well, enough small talk, I guess," he said and then placed the jar of stew over the fire on some stones. "We'll both be gone from here tomorrow for that matter."

For some reason, his comment did nothing but stir up my doubts and fear.

I was alone. That had never been the plan.

I frowned as I glanced at the flames.

"I was kidding," he said out of the blue.

"What?"

"About the stew. It's not roadkill."

He grinned, and suddenly, everything felt right with the world. I felt safe. But nothing was permanent. Not in my world, at least.

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Chapter Eight

Xenon

Just before drifting off to sleep, Meadow had warned me once again that she was a light sleeper and not to try anything. Even now, as I watched the rise and fall of her midsection and her faint breathing, I knew she hadn't lied about that. I also knew she probably wouldn't hesitate to stab me with the knife she held clutched in her fist just like she did Balto.

I grinned. I wasn't afraid to die, especially if it meant the last thing I saw when I took my last breath was a beautiful woman like her.

I had met stubborn women before. Women who thought they could beat any man's ass. But there was something about this one I couldn't figure out. There was more to her than just a pretty face and a tough girl attitude. Most common men might have felt threatened by her. Not me. Not an Alpha.

From my seated position in the corner of the tent, I admired her womanly silhouette under the quilt I loaned her. Her back faced me, but most of her wavy, black hair had fallen aside, giving me a partial view of perfect skin and a long, graceful neck. Her arm was draped over her midsection and the knife was clutched in her small fist. She was shaped like an hourglass. As she lay in the fetal position, her back was arched, showing off a round, plump ass.

My dick stiffened and my nuts swelled with seed.

I snatched up a twig from the ground and chewed on it.

I had to do something to keep my mind off the hunger. Not physical hunger. A different hunger. This one pushed deep, toying with my emotions.

Her scent was much stronger now that we were in the tent together. The smell was sweet and strong, reminding me of the lavender growing in the fields beyond uncaged borders. I'd never been so close to anything so perfect as her. As Meadow.

There was something else going on with her. I detected another scent, something that mingled with the lavender aroma believed to

be her signature smell.

What the fuck, X. You've never fawned over a chick like this. Why start now?

When my knot stirred at the base of my cock, I knew I had to distance myself from her and get a grip. This female was going to send me into an instant rut that I had no willpower to control. I couldn't afford to be compromised now. My blood brothers depended on me.

I glanced over at her again, listening to her even breathing. I made sure she was asleep before slipping out of the tent.

To the far right, a group of my blood brothers stood by a lake. I joined them.

Ketil handed me a flask of moonshine. "We thought you were knocked out, X."

"Can't sleep. Insomnia and all." I took a swig of the drink and handed the flask back to him.

"You still get insomnia?" He thrust the flask back at me. "This will do the trick."

Xonar draped his arm across my shoulder. "Be honest, brother. Insomnia ain't it. I saw you drag that captive girl in your tent."

"You took a woman to your bed? Serious?" Ketil blurted.

I leaned against a tree trunk. "It's not like that."

"Uh huh, sure it's not," Xonar replied, snatching the flask from me and taking a long gulp.

Ketil pointed at me. "You must be going through it bad, brother. It's not like you to take a captive. You run off scavenging when you're in a rut, don't you?"

"I tell you guys too many secrets."

"Don't keep all the good ones to yourself. Half of the other captives act like they haven't had good dick in ages. They were too easy, and they're all common. Not one omega in the bunch. What's this one like?"

"Careful, Xonar. She's not for passing around."

Laughing, Xonar crouched down to pick up a stiff twig. He rolled it up and stuck it between his teeth. "Sounds like a rut to me."

I took the flask back from him and took a few swigs. "I'm not in a rut," I told him, yet I didn't believe it myself.

"So then she's common, too. Some of us thought the discovery of Axil's omega in this sector would lead us to more in the same

place," Ketil said.

"Maybe you all thought wrong..." I said.

As they stirred up a conversation with some of the other men nearby, I tuned them out. I looked over my shoulder at the tent where I had left Meadow sleeping.

An odd thought crossed my mind, and I felt compelled to check the tent.

When I rose, Ketil exclaimed, "Going so soon, X?"

"I..." I scratched my head. "Be right back."

"See, I told ya. Chick has got him in a rut," Xonar joked.

Taking long strides back to the tent, I tuned them out once again.

I peeled the opening back and peeked inside.

Under the quilt was absolutely no one.

Meadow was gone.

"Fuck."

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Chapter Nine

Meadow

I didn't regret leaving.

Nope. Not at all.

I had planned to wait until he was sound asleep to make my escape, but he stayed awake. Judging from the sounds of his uneven and rough breathing, he never even laid down. Instead, he unknowingly made it easier for me by leaving the tent. And his so-called brothers? Most of them were too busy getting it on with the sex-deprived women of Legance, they didn't notice me racing for the trees.

I probably did Xenon a favor by leaving. He and his clan had a serious mission, and I doubted helping a homeless stranger was part of it.

It took me a bit to realize the situation I was in. But sooner or later, with no family and having been banished from my sector, it was bound to happen.

There I was in the darkness with just the clothes on my back, using the tactics I had learned during survival training.

I was capable of making it. I wasn't stupid or suicidal. I knew where to run, where to hide, how to seek shelter, and how to make and set traps for food.

Xenon was right about one thing, I needed the sun to guide me in the right direction. I had to be careful out here until the first rays of morning light poured in.

I had a plan. During the day, I'd find places to scavenge for supplies to tide me over and make a small shelter until I reached a suitable settlement. Nova, maybe. Or Providencia. Or maybe I wouldn't settle in a sector at all. It was said there were plenty of independent sanctuaries. I just had to find them.

Bridget and the other escapees were probably long gone by now, and I didn't blame them. It was very likely I'd never see that girl again. That's what happened these days. Either people got lost, or you lost them.

Or…they betrayed you.

I crouched down near a tree to catch my breath. It didn't make sense to run. There wasn't anything after me, and I needed to conserve my energy just in case I needed to take off. There were far more dangerous things out here in the wild than Alphas. But if I kept quiet and kept my distance, I'd be fine. I needed to believe that.

Up ahead, I heard the sounds of water streaming through rocks. Sure enough, I came into a clearing near a small brook. Suddenly feeling like it was one hundred degrees out, I took off my coat and let the cool, dry air soak into my heated skin. After drinking straight from the water source and using it to refresh my face and soothe the nicks and cuts on the exposed parts of my skin, I perched at the shore for a while, trying to remember if I'd ever visited this place before. If I remembered, maybe I'd get a head start in the right direction before sunrise, but nothing about this little small piece of nature brought back any memories.

I missed having my stuff with me. I always kept a map, weapons, and survival supplies with me, but when the guards found me, I had nothing.

If only I hadn't been pushed off the cliff with my backpack…

Everything…my whole life and all of my belongings were in that backpack. I'd never find it again.

I sighed, grabbed my coat, rose, and brushed the sand off my pants.

I thought about walking along the bank of the river to see where it took me, but it was too risky. I had to stay out of sight. The last thing I wanted was to be snatched up by more guards and accused of trespassing again.

As I walked away from the narrow trail, I was relieved to see some light breaking through the clouds. Looking at the position of the moon, I divided the sky into quarters and estimated it was maybe five hours after midnight. Only about an hour before sunrise, and then I could breathe again. Or at least, that's what I'd thought…

On my next step, something tightened around my ankle and my body somersaulted into the air. My lungs deflated while I tried gasping for breath and clawing at the thing holding my ankle. I fought like a madwoman for about a minute before realizing I was suspended and caught in a trap that was probably meant for some animal.

For fuck's sake. Was this nature's way of striking back at me?

I had made traps like these on many occasions. In fact, as a carver by profession, I was one of the only three people in my prior group that had experience with making certain traps. It was how I paid my way. It was how I contributed to the group.

"Stay calm, Meadow," I whispered to myself.

I grabbed the knife from my waist and slowly curled upward so I could cut the rope from my ankle. With gravity weighing against me, it was harder than I'd thought. It took five tries to successfully swing myself upward and grab hold of the ropes. I knew I'd fall hard on the ground on impact, but the human body wasn't made to be suspended upside down for prolonged periods and I already felt the blood rushing to my head.

I squeezed my eyes shut with the sharp blade on the rope, praying I didn't break a leg again. Right when I was about to make the cut, I heard an animal growl.

I panicked and froze, shifting my gaze in the direction of the animal.

A cougar!

A huge brown cougar with teeth as sharp as my knife snarled up at me.

I thought if I remained very still that it'd lose interest and run off, but that wasn't the case. The animal wasn't stupid.

It leaped into the air, bit my jacket, and tore at it. The chilly air brushed against my skin.

I screamed.

The cougar gnawed at my coat on the ground for only a few seconds before turning its sights back on me. It leaped into the air and snatched a few strands from my hair with its teeth.

I realized my only lifeline was to remain suspended in the air until the cougar stopped attacking me.

All I had was the knife, but something told me it wasn't enough to take down an angry cougar no matter how hard I tried.

My arms hurt like hell trying to hold on. My sweaty palms blistered while tugging at the rope, trying to pull myself out of reach.

I struggled, and the knife slipped from my hand and fell to the ground. I lost my hold on the rope and fell back. The cougar jumped up and tore at my shirt. Some of my hair got caught in its teeth again, and it tugged. I cried out, tugging back and folding

myself up quickly, hugging my body to the rope.

The cougar circled the tree.

Oh, God. It made an attempt to climb the tree.

I thought to call for help, but I knew there wasn't anyone out here. I was alone.

I looked all around me, searching for something, anything I could use to either distract or injure the cougar.

The cougar jumped high in the air, snapping at my arm. I screamed again.

Just when I thought I'd have to give up, I heard something rustling through the bushes. Even the cougar noticed the sound. It froze and looked in the direction of the noise, baring its fangs.

An arrow sailed through the air and struck the cougar in its hind leg. It yelped and got up but never moved from beneath me.

Xenon stepped out of the tall shrubs with a bow in his hand. The cougar wasted no time. It charged him with the arrow still stuck in its legs. Alpha and cougar met head-on. They ended up on the ground. Xenon rolled over with the cougar, latched his fist around its neck, and twisted. The sound of a crack of bone sliced the air, and then there was silence.

So, myth number one-hundred-and-one was most definitely not a myth. It was truth. *Uncaged Alphas could kill with their bare hands.*

Sometime during the fight, I must've let go, because I was dangling upside down with one leg still caught in the rope.

My vision grew hazy. Xenon's figure seemed like a figment of my imagination. Maybe I was dreaming or hallucinating. Or had my worst nightmare come to life? Was I dying?

"I've got you." A soft, familiar voice urged me back to the light.

I remembered warm arms hugging me and then a slight shift in my body's elevation when my ankle was freed from the rope.

Xenon's voice wasn't the only voice or figure I saw.

"You found her?" another man asked.

"Yeah, I've got her."

"Damn. Look at this thing's teeth. A young one, but he probably would've delivered a nasty bite," a guy said. "Did he get her?"

"No."

"Xenon." I rubbed my forehead as my vertigo slowly faded away. I tried to feel the ground beneath my feet, but I was still in Xenon's arms, huddling against his rock-hard solid chest.

"Careful," he said, setting me down on the ground. He didn't

take his arms away from me until he was sure I had balance.

"You killed it?" I looked at the cougar on the ground. "I was almost his lunch. Thanks. How did you find me?"

"I tracked you by scent. That's what I do. I track. I also heard your screams."

I closed my eyes and exhaled. "I should've watched where I was going. I know better. The trap caught me."

"I can see that. Looks like a hunter's trap. It probably wasn't meant for you. It was meant for him." He pointed at the cougar.

"Only I unknowingly offered myself up as bait." I laughed nervously, but I was still shaken by everything. "Plus, I kind of got tired of hearing women scream for more and more."

He looked puzzled. "I don't follow."

"You couldn't hear the couples having sex on both sides of us while we were in the tent?"

"Ah, oh that. I've learned to drown them out. You'll have to excuse my brothers. Some are quite deprived of women these days."

I blushed. "Sounds like the women didn't mind it." I shifted my gaze away.

Xenon placed hands on both his hips and then narrowed his eyes. "You've changed the subject. I warned you it wasn't safe out here. Not during this season, anyway. Resources are scarce for both people and animals. Everyone is hunting, trying to fatten up for winter. This is when people and animals do desperate things to stay alive. I thought we agreed I'd lead you away from Legance on a safer path."

"I know you mean well, Xenon, but I don't need an escort or a savior or a bodyguard."

"What *do* you need?"

His question surprised me. Truth was, I wasn't sure what it was I wanted. And even if I knew, I wasn't dumb enough to think I'd always be happy. Nothing ever stayed the same. People betrayed people. At least the animals—namely the cougar—were upfront about what he wanted.

I peeked over his shoulder at the two grown men he brought with him. They talked amongst themselves. Probably about me. Their eyes shifted in my direction. I knew doubt when I saw it. I wasn't like them. They were right to be wary of me.

"I just need to go," I answered him, turning around.

He reached out and took my hand, gently spinning me to face

him. “I just want to be clear about one thing. I don’t want you walking around in the woods by yourself.”

I shook my head. “You don’t even know me.”

“We don’t leave women out to fend for themselves. It’s not safe.”

“Then point the way, and I’ll go that way instead.”

“You are so stubborn.”

“I need to be that way to stay alive,” I countered.

“Is that what you really think?” he asked.

If only he knew. “What about that other Alpha who wants to kill me for stabbing him?”

He shook his head. “He’s gone. He and a couple of other Alphas headed back to Mistacre on their own accord. Besides, he wouldn’t kill you.”

I rolled my eyes. “It seemed like he wanted to. I’m better off out here.”

“Do you know how I was able to find you so fast? You had your menses recently, and now you’re fertile.”

I gasped. Heat flooded up to my face in embarrassment. “That’s none of your business.”

“I could’ve found you blindfolded.”

“That’s just ridiculous.” I wrapped my arms across my chest to stop the chills taking over my body. The cougar had torn up my coat so badly, the fabric was littered like scraps on the ground. I was horrified to think that could’ve been chunks of me, instead.

“What’s this?” I felt his touch right against the upper left side of my back where that dreaded symbol was. A small, shaded-in inverted triangle in a larger circle.

I froze and swallowed.

“Meadow?”

“It’s nothing.”

“You wear a shadow mark on your back. This is the mark of the dark Romanys—dark travelers.”

“I...” I panted.

“We’d better go, X. Sun’s up. Those hunters will be back,” one of the men warned.

I covered up the mark, but not before one of them saw it.

“Dude, she’s a dark traveler,” the other guy commented.

“I’m not,” I said, quickly.

“She’s really got some nerve,” the other exclaimed.

“Enough,” Xenon growled. “Go and tell Axil I’ll be back in time

for the meeting. I'll catch up with you all. Thanks for covering my back."

The men left.

Xenon shrugged out of his overcoat and hung it across my shoulders. Instant warmth encompassed me the moment the soft furs touched my skin. The scent on the coat was like a soothing drug.

When they were out of earshot but still within eyesight, I said, "I'm not what you think, but if you have doubts, let me go now."

"You don't really want to be out here alone, do you?" he asked.

I looked down at a sole rock stuck in the dirt.

He touched my face, lifting my chin. "My clan will leave Legance tomorrow. We'll travel through safer territories. If you still don't trust me and you want to go off on your own, then..." He didn't finish. He looked away and then back at me once more. He held out his hand, palm up. "Let me help you."

I sighed. "Now that they know I'm affiliated with the dark travelers, your clan will have me killed. I know that Alphas and travelers don't get along."

"I'm an Alpha, Meadow. No one would dare touch you."

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Chapter Ten

Meadow

“How long have you been traveling?” Xenon asked as we headed back to the camp.

I hadn’t realized I had gotten so far, but apparently, we were a good half hour from Legance borders.

“I was sixteen when I left Ocane with my mother. So, three years…give or take a few months,” I said.

“Ocane?” He turned to glance at me with furrowed eyebrows. “That’s further south of here. Is that where you’re from originally?”

“Yes.”

“The leaders in Ocane are much more level-headed than that pig in Legance, so how did you end up in this area?”

I sighed. “Long story.”

He handed me a canteen which I drank from. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“To understand why I’m in this predicament, you should know that I was banished from Ocane.”

“What did you do? Stab a man in the back of the leg?”

I chuckled. “No. I wasn’t as mean back then.”

He laughed.

“My mother and I left Ocane with the Romanys after her aneurysm ruptured. The doctors in Ocane said she wouldn’t live past a year, so they decided not to treat her any further. They sent her home to die. But the Romany travelers helped us.”

He scratched his chin. “There are many groups of travelers, but I’m quite familiar with the specific mark on your back. How did the Romany help your mother?”

“The merchant who always brought us fresh eggs saw her bedridden. She said she knew someone who could ease her pain. She said she was Romany and her group had been staying in Ocane for about a year. My mother agreed to see their healer, and within two days, she felt better. My mother became friends with almost everyone in their group. She had a great personality. They loved

her. And of course, my mother never judged them or called them cursed gypsies or witches or anything like that. When she found out they were leaving in a few weeks, she was devastated. They asked my mother to come with them. All my mother would have to do was pledge loyalty to the leader and never betray them. And so my mother agreed. She wanted to live out the rest of her life traveling."

"And so you went with your mother," he stated.

I nodded. "I did. At a cost. I was already listed in Ocane's registry as a fertile female. My mother and I received a monthly living stipend to remain in Ocane. She was a single mom, so she needed, I mean, *we* needed the money. I had just two years left before I would've been expected to marry or be paired with some guy. My mom and I never planned to leave, but life got in the way, you know. The laws of Ocane aren't set up to force people to stay. Instead, they're encouraged to stay with gifts, stipends, and promises of being publicly recognized. However, if and when families decide to leave, they are forbidden from ever returning. My mom wanted me to stay, but I ultimately went with her knowing that I'd be banished. We took the shadow mark to prove that we'd be loyal followers. I'd make the same choice again. In Ocane, my mother was given months to live, but because of the Romany healer, I got more time with her. I got years with her."

"I understand. You do what you have to do for family," he commented. "As for the mark, it signifies a lot of things to different groups."

"Like what?"

"For one, traveler. And sometimes scavenger. A very long time ago, the travelers were known for stealing from us. They also did some very bad things that caused a lot of problems."

"Hmm, I might've stolen a time or two from different groups," I said nonchalantly. "They usually send in the smaller ones. Those who can get in and out fast."

He chuckled. "You are fast. Your targets probably never knew what hit them."

"Well, it's a dog eat dog world out here."

"I've never seen any dogs eat other dogs."

I nudged him. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah. I do. We've all done things to survive," he said. "What happened after your mother...was gone?"

"I stayed. I planned to settle and leave the group one day, and I

made my plans known. They seemed okay with it, and I know that others have stayed behind in sectors in the past. We moved from place to place as often as the seasons changed, so it was just a matter of finding a place where I wanted to live. I knew my only chance was to gain trust in a sector, find work there, and eventually find a home. For a month, the group lived just outside of Nova. They were allowed to build temporary housing there. I'm not sure what the Romany leader offered the Nova governor in return, but there was peace for a time."

"The dark travelers have a reputation, too. I think I know where this is going. Calm before the storm kind of thing?" Xenon asked.

"Maybe, but I wasn't around long enough to find out if the group was eventually welcomed into Nova," I replied.

"You split off?"

"Not really. Yes, but no." I sighed and then continued, "One day, I visited Nova with some of the younger travelers in the group. They wanted to party and have fun, but I had other things in mind. There was this one guy who just couldn't take the hint. Rick. He was Romany. Not just a follower. He believed in tradition. My mom liked him for some reason and invited him over to have a meal with us months before she passed. I think he planned to ask me to marry him or something. There were others, too. I always wondered what I did to get so much attention from them. I never sought it."

"You're extremely attractive, for one. Both in personality and looks. Sounds like you weren't interested in this Rick guy or the others."

"I don't think I was interested in marriage at all. I...I didn't love him. I..." I blushed.

"I get it."

"So, I finally lost them. While they were out getting drunk, I talked to an old merchant who owned a pottery shop. He was busy and told me to come back the next day with some of my work. I was so excited. I couldn't wait to get back to the camp to work on something to show him. I was walking back to camp with the others and I might have stopped to look at the sunset. I can't remember why I stopped. A girl—the same girl who I spotted making out with Rick at one of the carnivals—came up and told me to stop flirting with her boyfriend and pushed me. My heart dropped, and so did I. The last thing I remembered was looking up into the sky at an eagle. I can't even remember the girl's name, but just before I

passed out, she stood over the cliff and looked down at me."

Xenon stopped. "Wow. I thought you were going to tell me you slipped and fell."

I shook my head. "Nope. I'm clumsy, so that was a big possibility, and a possibility that would've made me feel better. But she pushed me and then checked to see if I was still alive and left."

"She was nasty for doing that."

"I guess she saw me as a threat to her relationship with Rick. I never flirted with him. He was pushy with me. I didn't want a relationship, and I told him that. With so few men, I learned that some of the women can be very competitive, and in most cases, it's encouraged. I had no idea that one of them would try to murder me to get me out of the picture. I almost lost my life, and I wasn't even interested in him."

"You must've fallen into Legance territory," Xenon stated.

"I did. They claimed I was trespassing and took me into custody. It wasn't like I could run. My leg was broken. And at that point, I couldn't even defend myself, because I had fallen so hard I couldn't remember how it happened. It took me days to finally clear my head and weeks to heal. They put me in a boarding house when I got better. The others called it reform school. They told me if I behaved, I could stay as long as I wanted. I knew it was a trap. I knew what they wanted when they made me take that test."

"The test to see if you're fertile?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Fertile females like you are hard to come by," he noted.

"Yes, I know." I plucked a tall grass from the ground, fidgeting with it as I started to walk again.

Nature and wildlife began to wake up now that full daylight broke through the clouds.

Squirrels darted in front of us to get from tree to tree. Birds dipped low in flight, searching for bugs and worms. The smell of fresh morning dew was something I'd never tire of. I suddenly remembered what it was I loved about traveling and being out in nature.

"What about you?" I asked. "Do you travel much? And where exactly is your home?"

"I scout and track. I'm good at finding things. Or at least that's what everyone keeps saying."

"And you don't believe it?"

“Not really. The thing I’d like to find has yet to show themself.”

“Thing? Themself? Are you searching for a thing or a person?”

He shrugged and then readjusted his bag on his shoulder. “Both, I guess.”

“And your home? Where is it?”

I knew the Alphas had settled somewhere. Everyone knew they had a place among ruins, but I’d never once seen a village of uncaged in my three years of traveling. I’d only seen a couple of Alphas here and there.

“I can’t say, but if you’d like to know where, I’ll take you.”

“What’s this place called?” I asked.

“Mistacre. It’s not too far from here. We also have Northgarde, which we took from a tribe in Gaia a long time ago.”

“Just like the Romanys, you’re considered outsiders in this world. Yet, your people have managed to acquire land and settle permanently.”

“See? We’re not as stupid and savage as you were taught to believe.”

“But there are other clans like yours, aren’t there?”

He glanced ahead with a troubled, faraway look in his eyes. “We’ve branched off twice before, so yes, somewhere in this world, there are.”

“You said you were searching for a person? Who is it? Your long-lost lover?” I had already blurted out my question before I could stop myself. My emotions seemed to have a mind of their own. I couldn’t even stop the slow blush spreading up my chest.

“Is this your way of asking me if I’m single?” he teased.

“No, not at all.” I pressed my lips together.

“My brother’s been missing for quite some time,” he said.

“Oh…what do you think happened to him?”

“Like you, he was banished from Mistacre a long time ago. Except, we call it exile. His time away was supposed to last two years, and then he was permitted to return. He never came back. Never sent word of his whereabouts. Nothing. I know he’s out there. He just doesn’t want to be found.”

“Some people just need time. Why was he exiled?”

“For committing murder.”

“Oh.”

“He was family. I should’ve left with him.”

He regretted his decision. I felt it in his voice.

The sound of cascading water distracted me. Up ahead, I spotted a vast waterfall overflowing into a lake.

"Wow..." I trailed off away from Xenon, but I knew he followed me.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

The way the rising sun beamed down on the surface of the water at just the right angles created a sight I hadn't seen in a while.

"Yes."

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I learned to swim in a lake just like this. My mom taught me how. It'd be nice if I could just..." My voice trailed off.

"If you could just what?"

"Nothing."

He threw me a skeptical look. "You want to get in, don't you?"

"I know you're trying to get back to—"

"I have time. Plus, I could use a bath after all that tracking I just did."

I chuckled.

He dropped his belongings at his feet and gestured for me to come to the lake.

When we arrived at the bank, I looked around. The world was quiet as if Xenon and I were the only ones present. Realizing I hadn't taken a shower in two days, I kicked off my boots and let my toes sink in near the sand. The water was clear, and the sound of the showers plunging into the lake from the cliff above was peaceful.

I glanced at Xenon. "No peeking." I shrugged out of his overcoat.

He laughed. "I don't make promises I won't keep."

I cast him a look of indifference, and he shifted his attention to the ground. "Don't be shy. Go on."

"Who said I was shy?" I countered.

He shrugged. "Just saying."

"I was once a traveler. I didn't grow up privileged, or pampered, or afraid of boys. I'm not shy about cleaning up here. Besides, I'm sure you've seen dozens of women's bodies, being what you are and all." My gaze spanned the length of him.

"I—"

"Don't worry. I'll be quick," I said, without letting him finish.

"I'll just be the lookout guy and let you know if I see another

cougar trying to jump you," he said.

I pressed my lips together, hiding a giggle.

I let the coat fall to the ground, peeled out of my outer layer of clothing, and slipped into the water.

Xenon pretended to search the perimeter, but I caught his eyes shifting towards me every few seconds. I shook my head and blushed. The water was cool, but a pulse of heat began to build low in my belly and between my legs. In the middle of the forest with an Alpha within six feet of me, the urge to pleasure myself manifested. This couldn't be happening. Not here. Not now.

I stole a glance at him as he pulled his shirt over his head. He was molded from perfection. He was perfection. The man was a work of art, for sure. Pressure built around my clit, and a brief rush of euphoria consumed me. I once believed it was a myth that an Alpha could make a woman climax by just staring at her. My body definitely reacted, and I began to believe that myth was truth.

I looked away and swam to the other side of the lake under the privacy of the waterfalls.

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Chapter Eleven

Xenon

Meadow was smart, adept, and gutsy.

She had learned a lot about Alphas from hearsay and others who didn't know what they were actually talking about.

There was one rule they failed to tell her: *Never tempt an Alpha.*

She broke the rule over and over again, starting with the moment she pulled a knife on a friend. And now, she dared to reveal her nakedness to me. Didn't she know what I could do to her? Didn't she know what I was capable of? She might not have known that many of her actions triggered Alphas just like me. They said I was honorable, but at that moment, my urges were stronger than my morals.

Meadow was an Alpha's dream come true.

She wasn't easily intimidated.

She didn't like surrendering without a fight.

And to me, she was the most desirable thing I'd ever seen.

My dick swelled beneath my fly, but there wasn't anything I could do to stop the erection. A dive in the lake would help, but I already knew what was happening to me.

Without taking off my pants, I waded into the center of the water.

I didn't pretend to not see her anymore. Maybe she knew I was looking.

With her back to me, she sunk into the water and then came up again. Her long, wavy, wet hair was plastered against her flawless neck and back. The ends of her hair reached the plush curve of her ass. Her wide hips and hourglass figure told me her body would be perfect for breeding. Even a common man would've looked at her and concluded that she was fertile.

I swallowed when she turned around with her arms covering her breasts and then disappeared under the water again.

When she appeared again, she hoisted herself up out of the lake and put her clothes back on.

With an erection the size of Mt. Everest, I trod slowly through the water to get to the shore.

She blushed, biting her bottom lip as she looked at me.

“Do you feel all better now?” I asked.

I picked up my overcoat and handed it back to her.

“Yes.” She swung the coat over her shoulder, slipping her arms inside.

Her skin was still damp, and I saw the outline of her taut nipples brushing against her shirt.

A shift in the wind brought her scent to my nostrils. One whiff and I knew something had changed between us. Something had changed within her.

Now I knew. I knew why I was drawn to her. Attracted to her. Mesmerized by her.

I knew why I risked everything to track her and bring her back to safety.

She was more valuable than she realized. Worth more than anything else on this earth.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she breathed.

Mixed with her lavender scent was an aroma I knew all too well.

My mouth watered. The word for what she was rested on the tip of my tongue. I didn’t say it out loud. My body had already confirmed it for me. And just like a slave to my urges, my rutting instincts awakened deep within me.

It was going to take everything in me to leave her untouched and un-ravaged. It was going to take a woman who wouldn’t surrender so easily.

“Meadow.” I lifted a tendril of her hair, bringing it to my nose. She didn’t stop me then, and she didn’t stop me when I took a long inhale.

“I made you a promise,” I said. “I will keep it. But you must do something for me. It’s important if this is to go the way we planned.”

She lifted her eyes to lock with mine and swallowed visibly. “What is it?”

“Don’t remove my overcoat. It’ll mask your scent from the others.”

“M-my scent?”

“You’re an omega, Meadow.”

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Chapter Twelve

Meadow

I didn't realize we were so close to Legance and the temporary campsite, but it took less than fifteen minutes to get back. Aside from asking what it meant to be an omega even though I'd heard some stories, I was too deep in my own thoughts to grill him any further.

So many times throughout my life, I wondered why I could never relate to my female friends. While they all hit puberty by fourteen and some as young as eleven, I didn't have my first menstruation until right before my sixteenth birthday. And then, not too long after that, I left Ocane with my mother and the travelers, forbidden from ever returning. The last thing on my mind while my mother and I enjoyed our freedom together in the wilderness was my ability to ovulate and have babies.

Even then, my cycles were infrequent, coming only once in a blue moon. My mother confided my condition to our traveling nurse, and she agreed that it wasn't normal. She even questioned the validity of the fertility test I was forced to take when I was a girl.

Once the nurse knew about my extremely irregular cycles, I asked my mother never to tell anyone about it since the nurse looked at me strangely whenever she saw me. She swore she wouldn't if I promised to protect myself while having sex since I couldn't track my fertile days like the other girls.

Now that I had some answers, I had more questions.

"What caused this? Why didn't you know before like when you met me? Aren't Alphas good at detecting that sort of thing?"

"Sometimes when an omega is in the presence of an Alpha, it triggers her heat," he replied.

"But I've met an Alpha before. And I've never felt this way." I had just literally told him that I felt something. I wasn't sure what it was, but I felt something towards him.

"You never told me where you met the Alpha and under what

circumstances. That makes a difference."

"Our group traded a lot. My mom and I would sometimes fix the frames on used traps instead of carving out new ones. There was an Alpha who collected them. He traded on the open market, and I went that day because she wasn't feeling well. I saw the mark. Like yours. And I could just tell he was. You guys are huge, and there's no mistaking you."

"When was this?"

"Maybe a year ago." She shrugged.

"An Alpha isn't going to be triggered by every omega he meets. And vice versa. We've learned how to control our ruts in some cases."

"Ruts?"

"It happens when our mating urges are triggered by an omega."

Before I could ask him if he was triggered by my presence, we reached the main area. People stopped what they were doing, pausing their conversation to stare at us.

"Why does it look like your friends and family want to gang up on me?" I asked, pulling his overcoat tighter around my midsection.

"They don't. They probably know by now that you've walked with dark travelers. Errol and Denali probably ratted you out. Some of them haven't seen a traveler in years."

I stopped. "I don't even know why I'm here. They'll hate me," I exclaimed.

"Don't worry. *You* did nothing wrong. Come. I have to head out just one more time. I need your word that you won't leave my tent until I get back."

I swallowed and looked around at the inquisitive faces. "I told you what happened to me before. I'm not sure about this."

He closed the distance between us, touching me on the forearm. "You were betrayed. I know something like that can scar someone forever. I'm not asking you to trust so soon." He took his bag off his back and handed it to me. "Don't leave. If you do run off, promise me you'll take supplies with you. Just remember that I know your scent and I'll be right behind you. I'm not leaving you in the forest alone."

"Okay. I won't run off. Take your bag back. And in case you haven't noticed, I'm too tired to run anywhere right now. I haven't slept in over twenty-four hours."

He grinned. "Who needs sleep anyway? It's so overrated."

I was supposed to be afraid of what lay ahead for me, but in the midst of it all, Xenon made me smile.

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Chapter Thirteen

Xenon

Leon Wynnell was in horrible shape. Yet, as we demanded, we met him in his study late that afternoon. We weren't surprised to see his mother back at his side. Aside from Leon and his mother, two other men in business suits were in the room. Leon had introduced them as trusted council members when we arrived. I couldn't even remember their names, but that was beside the point.

"It should come as no surprise that I want you and your clan of savages out of my sector," Leon said. He sat behind the desk with his one broken arm in a sling.

"And like I said, when you pay us for the damages you caused, we will leave," Axil replied.

"Furthermore, our women are not your pleasure slaves."

"Tell the women that," Ketil said from his position by the door. "What is your sister's name? Elle, is it? Even the most innocent don't like being sheltered. But not to worry, I've liberated her. You will thank me later. She's already done so." He adjusted his crotch in a show of defiance.

Leon nearly rose, but both council members placed their hands on his shoulders to make him sit.

"Control your temper," one of them told him.

"What more do you savages want? You rape our women. Leading them astray," the other council member stated.

"Only dogs can be led astray, old man. I can assure you. No one has been taken against their will," Axil said.

"Give them three crates of food and medical supplies and let them be gone. It's enough to get any village through the winter," the council member suggested.

Axil busted out laughing, and then he cleared his throat and made a straight face. "We don't want your food. We produce our own. We want the tanks."

"The tanks! That's ludicrous. We can't just pick up the tanks and give them to you," Leon countered.

“We want the tanks and the surrounding land it sits on so we may reproduce the oil you destroyed. You won’t have any rights to anything we produce, and our attempts to trade with other villages will go unmolested.” Axil produced a folded-up piece of paper from his back pocket and unfolded it on the desk in front of Leon. I noticed it was a map that he had snatched earlier from one of the libraries in the sector the day we executed the breach.

“No...” a council member said. “We cannot give them that. It is our land now. It was technically a part of Anchora, and now it is rightfully ours.”

Leon held up a finger to shut the man up. “It is barren land. They can have it.”

“While we’re on that point, let me show you exactly where this acquisition will end and begin.” Axil handed the pen to me.

I knew exactly which area he wanted to stake a claim in. We had talked about territory lines before the raid. And as a tracker, I had traveled the borders many times in search of supplies, as well as in search of my brother.

I took the pen and traced the borders. “We will annex the lands here to our settlement. That’s about a fifty-mile radius around the tanks. When we get to the valley—here—there is a notable landmark that divides Anchora from Legance. We’ll divide that in half. And lastly, the northern portion of the forest directly above Legance abuts our hunting grounds. The two-hundred-mile marker starts here and ends there. We’ll take it, too.”

“This is theft!” the same council member proclaimed.

Leon glanced back at the council member, shook his head, and then turned his attention back to me. “You know that area well. You must’ve trespassed.”

“To set those tanks on fire, you sent your men to trespass on our property. We’re all guilty. Some are more guilty than others,” I retorted.

He rubbed his chin. “Leave at once without any more of our women, and I’ll agree to turn over the tanks. I don’t know about all of this extra.”

“Women aren’t slaves. If they wish to leave with us, they will leave with us,” Axil countered. “And if you think we came here to accept an unfavorable deal, you are a fool.”

“Well, then, you’ll be gone as soon as we finalize this.” He pondered the territory, tapping the pen on the map. “If we give you

all this land, you must promise never to attack us again. *Ever.*" He dropped the pen and looked up. "Do we have a deal?"

Axil shook his head. "No. Warranted attacks will be carried out if we are threatened, so I cannot promise you that. Let me remind you, we have already incurred loss because of you. I'm here today to collect payment for the destruction you've caused. I'm in no position to make any new deals with you. You *will* agree, or you'll pay in kind or in blood. And when we're done here, the women will be the least of your worries."

The Adam's apple on Leon's throat bobbed up and down as he swallowed. The council members standing behind him took a step back.

Axil picked up the pen, extending it to Leon. "This is the price you'll pay for crossing us. Sign, or we'll take by theft. The choice is yours."

We left the Wynnell mansion with far more territory than we bargained for. We were made whole again and then some, but it'd take some time to replace what was lost from the tanks. Now that the land was ours, we'd do the necessary repairs and not have to worry about anyone coming to steal or take away what we worked so hard for.

While the other Alphas walked up ahead to take the news to our group that we were to pack up and head out at once, Axil fell in step beside me.

"I'm glad you decided to come along. I needed you there. No one knows the outer boundaries like you do."

I clapped him on the back. "I wasn't going to leave you hanging, brother. You know that."

"I heard about the woman you have," he said.

"Betas have diarrhea of the mouth, don't they?"

"Apparently. She's wearing a shadow mark. Is that true?"

"Yes. She's not with them anymore. They betrayed her. One from her group pushed her off a cliff and left her to die. I don't sense any ill-intent from her. She only wanted to get away from Legance."

"No ill-intent? What about when she stabbed Balto?"

"She's not intimidated by any of us, for sure."

"Balto deserved it, anyway, and he knows that. He should've fucked someone before he came along. He said the first girl taunted him, but I made it clear that this mission wasn't to satisfy our

urges."

"He can't help it. Most of us can't help it," I replied.

"You, too?" He gave me a knowing look.

"I've controlled myself thus far." Yet, I knew it was only a matter of time before I'd go into a full rut if Meadow remained by my side, especially since I knew what she was.

"If you bring her, you know Echo will question her, don't you?" he asked. "He lost more than all of us when the dark travelers came."

"I know. I don't think she knows what the dark travelers did to us. She wasn't with them during that time. She's never been to Mistacre, so she couldn't have been involved in what they did to us."

"You should tell her about our history with her former group," he said.

"I will."

"And X?"

"What?" I asked.

"You betray yourself and her. You have it written all over your face."

I stopped. "What's written on my face?"

"She's an omega, isn't she?"

I swallowed. Before I could answer, Axil chuckled softly. "I'll give you one more piece of advice, brother. Get some sleep now before you trigger her heat."

"I think I already have."

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Chapter Fourteen

Meadow

Evaporation floated up above the lake as the chilly wind sent ripples across the surface. I stretched my legs out on the grass, admiring the way the sun glistened against the backdrop.

Drawing a circle in the dirt, I used the position of the sun to etch out a compass. Having known where the cougar attacked and where Legance was located, I already knew which direction not to travel in. If I wanted, I could leave now traveling in a southeastern direction to beat the cold.

There were a couple of things stopping me: It was too risky, and I wanted to give Xenon the benefit of the doubt. Something else kept me with Xenon and his clan. Did I fear being alone more than I feared sticking with a group of people who probably didn't trust me? Or was it something else, something more concrete encouraging me to stay? Even then, I wrapped his overcoat tightly around my midsection, inhaling the manly scent bringing me comfort.

Alphas and other members of the uncaged clan strolled about. Some carried fish caught from the lake, and others had trapped raccoons and other small game like geese to eat. A group of women who had willingly come from Legance sat under a tree several meters from me. They seemed happy—chatting, giggling, and eating. I spoke to a few from Xenon's clan as we walked through the forest for a couple of hours at a time. No one was rude or mean or pried. Everyone had to know by now that I used to live with the dark travelers. The conversations were limited to my name and what I did in Legance. Sometimes they asked if I dabbled in the dark arts. As soon as another Alpha came within a foot of me sniffing around, Xenon cast a stare that made the Alpha keep his distance.

Big leather boots came into view on the ground beside me. I was always surprised at how a man of Xenon's large size could sneak up on me without a sound.

I looked up at him, shielding my eyes from the sun by using my hand as a visor. He was shirtless and bronzed. At the sight of defined solid muscles forming ten pack abs, my lower core muscles tightened, and my chest burned. My attention settled on the huge bulge in his pants that seemed to increase in size whenever I looked at it.

Reason number three I had to get away: I was turning into a horny girl who hadn't indulged in sex in a very long. It was true. While he laid in the tent asleep last night, I tossed and turned with cramps in my side and a needy ache between my legs. It wasn't menstruation. Only a few days had passed since my last cycle. I was hot and bothered, but as soon as I threw his overcoat off my skin, my core ached and I longed to be covered in his scent once more. I couldn't tell him what was going on with my body. Knowing he hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours, I didn't bother waking him up to drill him about this new revelation. I left the tent to catch some fresh air. The outdoor noises and sounds of the people distracted me from my issue.

Omega. How in the hell was I an omega? I didn't believe it, but why would he lie?

I only knew half of what it meant to be an omega among Alphas. Alphas preferred omegas to mate with. To breed with. They craved them. And vice versa. But why was this the first time that an Alpha had this type of effect on me?

"Um...hi," I exclaimed. "Did you have a good nap?"

"I wasn't planning on sleeping that long. Why didn't you wake me before you left?"

I shrugged. "You looked peaceful."

"Some of the others went scouting, so it looks like we're camping here for another night. Want to catch dinner?" Xenon held a small bucket in one hand and a makeshift fishing rod in the other.

"Sure."

He sat down beside me, and I casually ran my fingers through the dirt, destroying the little diagram I made.

"I have about a dozen compasses. If you'd like one, all you have to do is ask. You don't have to draw in the mud," he commented.

I smiled. "I can't get anything past you, can I?"

"What were you thinking about?" he asked, biting off a piece of string and then tying it to the end of the rod.

"Staying and going."

“If you go, you’ll need some boots, warmer clothes, and a bucket load of supplies,” he said.

“And guess who’s fresh out of things to bargain with?” I joked before it dawned on me that I was homeless and broke.

“We’ll make our next stop at an open market. I have some things I scavenged recently to bargain with. You can re-up there. And then I could guide you further south to somewhat warmer weather if you still wish to go. However, if you stay in Mistacre at least for the winter…” He let his sentence linger.

We had already talked about me staying in Mistacre until the winter storms passed. This option was probably my best bet. “Why are you helping me?”

“Because I care.” He placed some fresh bait on the hook and threw the line out into the water. “I have something to tell you about the dark travelers you lived with.”

I sighed. “Want to know the truth?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“I’d rather forget about them. I know one person’s actions don’t define them all, but I’d rather not have these malicious thoughts only because something good came out of living with them.”

“I shouldn’t have brought it up,” he said.

“It’s okay. I got what I deserved maybe. I had a weird feeling. A feeling that told me to leave long before I did, but I stayed because I was afraid of being alone. One day I’ll talk about it, but for now, I’m just not ready.”

He was quiet for a bit.

“You said you had a brother?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Do you think he’s really lost? Do you think he’s actually alone?”

“If he’s out there, he’s alone because he chooses to be. He’s a likable guy, laid back, not an ass, like me.”

I giggled. “I don’t think you’re an ass.”

“I’ve been on my best behavior.”

“What happened? How did the murder happen?” I asked.

“He killed another Alpha for causing the death of his wife. The Alpha swore it was an accident. All evidence pointed to it being an accident, but my brother lost it and snapped.” He sighed heavily. “At the time, Echo had just passed a law that punished us for inciting violence within our own community. We had just gone

through years of fighting amongst each other. The fighting became persistent, especially while the dark travelers were permitted to seek sanctuary within our borders. They caused a lot of the rift between my brothers and me." He shook his head. "Anyway, killing another Alpha without reason is a huge offense, of course. If Echo was to be respected, he had to follow through with the laws he made. He made an example out of my brother by exiling him for two years. The punishment is still done today. But any Alpha that's worth a damn usually returns after living out their sentence with the admission that they were in fact at fault. My brother never showed his face within our borders after his time was up."

"Is that what you wanted to tell me about them? That they left your community in worse shape than it was before they came?"

He nodded. "It was our fault. We let them in."

I looked at the ground, saddened that those who I had trusted and lived with for so long could do such a thing. But I knew there were some good people affiliated with that group. They weren't all bad.

Xenon leaned in and lifted a lock of my hair off my shoulder. He sniffed at it, looked strangely at it for a second, and then at me.

"What?" I wondered if I smelled bad or something.

"Nothing."

"Did you say that the dark travelers instigated fights between Alphas when they were in Mistacre?"

"Yes, they caused strife within our entire community. We ran them out, but we paid the price for it. Echo paid the ultimate price. He's never been the same. He's distant. Some would even say he's heartless, but those of us who were once close to him know that he needs time. Anyway, this was before you traveled with them. If my calculations are correct, their next semi-permanent destination might've been Ocane where they cured your mother."

"They didn't cure her. They only postponed the inevitable," I commented.

"You're right. On the other hand, no one here can deny that they can work miracles to some degree, but the cost isn't worth it."

"Apparently, they overstayed their welcome in Ocane as well."

"Have you ever spoken to their ring leader?"

"No. He's like royalty. I've never spoken to him. He has people to carry messages about the community for him. If he calls someone before him, it's for something really good or something really bad.

And it's usually the latter. I mean, I've seen him from a far distance. He's always surrounded by his guards and sometimes his wives."

"Wives?" He choked on a laugh.

"Yeah. What?"

"I thought the old guy was sterile."

"I heard that, too."

Something pulled on the line, and Xenon rose to pull up a huge fish from the lake. It struggled to dive back in, but the meaty fish wasn't any match for a hungry Alpha with big, strong arms.

When it was out of the water and on the ground flapping around, I slid back. "What the heck is that thing?" The fish was big enough to feed a family and looked like a cross between a catfish and a small shark.

"A sturgeon."

"Wow, he looks healthy."

"Now that we've got our food, omega, let's go make dinner."

I blushed. Something about him calling me omega made me feel special.

"I'll start the fire."

When I lifted myself, my head spun and I almost lost my balance. The feeling of vertigo only lasted for a few seconds and then was gone. Without realizing it, I had fallen against Xenon's chest. He held me close, sliding my hair back from my face.

"You okay?"

I nodded, clinging to him like my life depended on it. "I'm just hungry, I think. Iron is a little low maybe."

He looked worried. "Let's get you fed. And then you should rest."

As we walked back to his tent, three Alphas passed us on the way. Two of them stopped mid stride and turned swiftly in my direction.

Something was happening.

My body felt different.

In the past, I could always tell a couple days beforehand that I was about to come down with a common cold, and that one time, I recalled I actually caught the flu.

It felt that way now. Only this time, I wasn't getting sick.

Something else was happening. Something had changed.

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Chapter Fifteen

Meadow

I must've fallen asleep sometime after we finished eating. I woke up in the center of a bundle of blankets to the sound of an owl hooting just outside the tent and shadows moving about. Xenon shuffled about inside. True to his word. He said he wouldn't leave me alone. It was too risky. He said the other Alphas had to have known by now I was an omega.

I rolled over quietly to find him wearing nothing but a pair of trouser shorts. He was on his knees, and his back was turned to me.

I gasped quietly as he dipped a cloth into a steaming hot bowl of water and proceeded to bathe himself. Muscles rippled beneath his flesh as he moved, taking the cloth and wiping it against his skin. I recognized the smell of the cleansing oil he used. A mixture of bath salts and tea tree. They sold those concoctions by the vial on the open market, but I could never afford to buy it. The fragrant oil was nothing compared to the husky sage scent that I knew was his signature.

He cupped up a handful of water and splashed it over his face and then wiped it dry with a cloth. Next, he ran his wet hand through his black hair. His forearms reminded me of tree trunks when he raised them once more to tousle his shoulder-length hair.

Once again, my insides warmed, and a tingling sensation flared up between my legs. My clit throbbed uncontrollably. I squeezed my legs together, hoping the pulsing sensation in my sex would go away. Something slick coated the insides of my thighs.

Suddenly, Xenon stopped moving. His back stiffened and he sniffed the air. After dropping the cloth in the water, he looked over his shoulder at me.

"Meadow."

"I...I...uh...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to look."

He turned around. His eyes were full of lust and longing. "You're in full heat, Meadow."

"How do I make it stop?" My gaze dropped to his cock. It was as

if I already knew the answer. I knew what my body craved. I licked my lips.

"You know," he growled, sending a strong cramp through my core.

"It's something about you, isn't it? There's something an Alpha has that prevents this."

"Not prevention. But comfort. And satisfaction. Pleasure and release," he whispered, leaning closer with each word.

"Release?" I swallowed. At the thought of sex and orgasms, a cramp ripped through my side, and the seat of my panties was instantly wet. "Oh my God. What is this? What's happening?"

I couldn't think straight. Instead, all I could focus on was the Alpha, the huskiness of his scent, and the intense heat that pulled us together.

Xenon came forward, joining me on the bundle of pillows and quilts, and slid his hand against my throat, cupping the back of my neck and bringing me closer.

"It's your body reacting to me. To us. Being together like this."

"Please, I need...something. I..." I arched upward, pressing my mid-section into his hardened core. "I'm not like this. I've never been this—needy. I usually take care of myself. I'm a burden. I'm so sorry."

He leaned in, kissing me on the side of my neck, right below my ear. His tongue slipped out and he swiped it across my throat, kissing me there. I purred beneath him. His touch was soothing, and I knew it was exactly what I needed.

"You're not a burden. Trust me when I say the feeling is mutual. I want you just as bad as you want me." He cupped the back of my head with his big hand, lacing his fingers through my hair. "As for being needy. You're an omega. You need an Alpha. Not just for protection, but for pleasure. I need an omega. Not just for breeding, but for my pleasure as well."

We kissed, and our lips fit together perfectly as if fused by fire. When his body came over mine, all tension immediately left my body. He fit perfectly against me.

He explored my mouth for a while, letting his tongue delve in and out. His kisses grew hot and heavy as agonizing cramps seized my core.

"I controlled myself before, but I can't fight this, Meadow. Something's different with you," he whispered against my mouth.

I grasped his forearm, holding onto him like my life depended on it. My center grinded into the hard length of his rod.

"I want you. Please, Xenon," I moaned against his mouth, shocked at my declaration.

He propped himself up on one hand and caught my gaze. "I cannot take you without claiming you. I can't hold back."

"What does that mean?"

He squeezed his eyes shut for a bit and then said, "I'm already knotting. I feel it. If I knot you, omega, you will be claimed."

"Claimed?" I cupped his cheek, pulling his lips to mine again so our tongues could touch.

"It means you will be my omega to take care of. Is that what you want?"

I nodded. "And you? Do you want me?"

His soul-sealing kiss was his answer.

Knowing the source of my pain and the solution to my problem, I let my hands search all over his body. The last time I had felt a man like this was...well, never. My few intimate encounters throughout the last few years couldn't compare to what I felt with Xenon, and this was only making out. Even then, most of those flings with men whose names and faces I couldn't remember were just a means to an end. Xenon was more than a man. He was an Alpha. There was no comparison. Nothing in this world compared to that moment.

He unbuttoned my blouse, accidentally popping one of the buttons off in haste, and then dived down to kiss my exposed flesh beneath my breasts. My sensitive nipples rubbed against my bra. My breasts swelled, begging to be free.

Hooking my fingers around the waistband of his shorts, I pushed them downward, eager to touch the hardened flesh that had taunted me since the first night. As soon as I had my fingers wrapped around the width of him, I realized why he always looked like he had an erection. He was huge.

"I love that you're not shy, omega. That turns me on more than you'll ever know," he exclaimed, ripping his shorts off and freeing his cock.

His erection was long and heavy, plopping out onto my belly. I wrapped my hand around the base of his cock, but my fingers failed to touch. As I stroked him, pre-cum drained over my fingers and onto my skin. Another cramp took over, my pussy clenched, and a

sweet-smelling fluid soaked my panties once again, seeping through my pants.

"It's never been like this," I said, squeezing my legs together and pressing my face into his chest in humiliation. "I'm making a mess of your blanket."

"Don't be embarrassed. It's called slick. Only an omega can produce it, and she does so in the presence of an Alpha."

"Is it normal to become sex-crazed in the presence of an Alpha?"

"Yes." He groaned and lowered himself again, kissing my face and neck.

As he explored, he rid me of my clothes. As I lay naked before him, my body shivered and quaked, but it wasn't from the cold. My responses anticipated his touch again. Only this time, there'd be nothing separating us.

I scooted backwards until I was in the center of the blanket. I lowered myself down on my back, spreading my legs and inviting him into the nest.

Nest?

How odd that I'd refer to this setup as a nest.

When he came over me, lowering his mouth to my aching nipples, all thoughts left me. The temperature of his mouth and tongue seemed to alternate between chilling hot and icy cold as he sucked and licked at my nipples, making them as stiff as thimbles.

His tongue was everywhere, leading a downward trail toward my mound. By the time he buried his head between my legs, more sweet-smelling slick had already melted from my pussy.

"Beautiful," he murmured, pressing my legs back and opening me to his heated gaze.

"Alpha, please," I cried out when his finger stroked the outside of my pussy lips.

"As you wish."

He plunged his tongue into me, once, twice, swirling it around my clit. I writhed beneath him as he teased the little button over and over again. He licked at my slick-coated pussy, moaning into my flesh, causing some serious vibrations. Thrusting repeatedly into my opening, he took in my juices, eating as if I was his first and last meal.

The painful cramping was gone, but another sensation flourished. My core unraveled slowly and then tightened up yet again as a climax rose within me.

He slipped two fingers into my sopping wet core and commanded, “Come.

Red-hot pulses flared through my veins, sparking my senses and combusting all at once. The walls of my pussy clenched around his fingers as my orgasms pulsed through my body like a targeted whirlwind.

He turned his hand around so his palm faced upward, curled his fingers up, and finger fucked my g-spot into immediate activation. I grabbed fistfuls of blankets and screamed through the second climax. Just before I fell limply on my back, he propped both of my thighs on his shoulders and dove in tongue-first for another helping.

“You taste like honey, Meadow. Lavender and honey,” he growled into my pussy.

“Impossible,” I panted.

He chuckled, deeply, causing my clit to jump. After dipping his fingers in my pussy again, he brought them up to my mouth. I parted my lips, sucking his digits inside. He was right. My slick was sweet and sent me into a euphoric moment.

As he spoke, he alternated between kisses at the inside of my thighs and my pussy lips. “Now, you agree. This is addicting. The smell of you. The taste of you. *The feel of you.* When it comes to you, omega, my mission is complete submission. Only then can I truly call you mine.”

“I will submit. You can have me,” I panted, not knowing completely what I agreed to.

“Submission is a vow and an act. It must be done.”

“I—” Before I could beg for more release, he flipped me over and propped me up on my hands and needs.

I spread my legs wider, bending over with my chest pressed to the blankets.

“Fuck me, Alpha.”

With an animalistic growl that rocked the tent, he thrust deep inside. I choked on a scream as his thick cock filled my pussy. He was huge. One thrust wasn’t enough to take him to the hilt. With the burning sensation of his turgid shaft stretching me beyond its limits, it felt as if I was a virgin all over again. It was torment, and it was bliss.

“It’s too big,” I exclaimed, trying to push back onto his cock. I needed more of him. I needed to feel him deep within me.

“Relax, omega.”

What he commanded, he got. My body obeyed every word. I produced more slick for him, and inch by inch, he buried himself until he was balls deep inside my needy pussy.

He leaned over me without moving his cock and began to kiss the back of my neck, licking and coating it with his saliva. His fingers moved to my clit again, stroking me there.

"You are tense, Meadow. It's okay to let go. It's okay to trust. You can trust me. I'd rather harm myself than to see you suffer."

I swallowed, closed my eyes, took a couple of deep breaths, and allowed myself to feel. To trust.

"There," he breathed. "Yes, that's it." He moaned and moved through my slickness. My pussy milked him as he pistoned his cock in and out of me. His heavy balls smacked into my clit, sending ripples through my body with each hit. He used my hair as a rein, knotting his fingers through it and forcing my head to fall back and my back to arch.

I called out his name through our throes of passion and then again when I climaxed. He growled into the air, pulled out all the way, and then slammed back inside me. His knot swelled, filling me more than I've ever been filled before. I knew the moment he locked inside of me. He couldn't move in or out. All he could do was let his seed spill inside me. I was seized up in the moment. I felt the heat of his semen coating my insides. There was so much cum. Loads of it. Combined with my slick, we created a mess of the covers.

He stayed locked inside for more than a few seconds. Minutes, maybe. I lost track of time.

My legs were like putty when it was finally over. Yet, it wasn't over.

He carefully brought us down, and we cuddled. Since he was still locked inside of me, he spooned me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

"Is the pain gone now?" he asked, stroking my belly with the palm of his hand.

I smiled. "It vanished." My eyes were heavy, and I tried to fight sleep, but I knew it was of no use.

He pulled me close, burying his face against the nape of my neck. "Good. I'm glad."

"And you? Was it good for you?" I blushed.

"It was out-of-this-world amazing. And if it were up to me, I'd

fuck you again this very instant, but I don't want to be rude."

I giggled. On a serious note, I knew I'd like being fucked over and over again by Xenon.

"Xenon?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not on birth control. I should've told you before...you know, we did that."

"Birth control?" he asked.

"Yes. I was taking an herbal mix before I was pushed. Before they dragged me to Legance. I've been off them for a month now."

He was quiet, so I continued talking. "I shouldn't be so careless. I'm homeless, after all. I don't think I'm ready to have a baby."

"It's okay, Meadow. Stop worrying. When you have an Alpha, when you have me, you'll never have to worry again. Let's get some sleep before we miss our chance to rest. Tomorrow is our shopping day, remember?"

"Shopping day?" I mumbled, yawning.

"Yes, don't you remember? I'm taking you to the open market."

"Good, because you owe me a blouse."

I felt a smile spread against my neck. "I am forever in your debt, omega."

His arms tightened around me, and I knew I was protected.

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Chapter Sixteen

Xenon

I sat on the stool in the center of the tent and bit the apple again, chewing hard as Meadow tossed and turned on the blankets. It took everything in me not to disturb her sleep even as her slick coated her thighs.

Was she having a nightmare, a dream, or a sexual fantasy?

I got my answer when she slipped her hand down between her legs and rocked against it. My dick was rock hard just from the sight of it. All around us, the other Alphas, betas, and common humans packed up while I drooled over her.

I hadn't gotten much sleep last night either, but I didn't blame that on her. I suffered from insomnia. Had suffered from it almost my whole life. Most Alphas did. I guess it was the downside of being the offspring of at least one parent who was medically, and sometimes scientifically, experimented on.

Still, all that was behind me. I was here now. What was done was already done, and my parents had gone through a lot to get our generation to a place where we'd never fear again.

I'd been so worked up over finding my brother safe and healthy that I forgot how to live for myself. Meadow brought that urge back to me.

She was an omega, but without a doubt, I knew she was *my omega*.

I'd never felt this certain. I'd never been this worked up over any woman. I'd been with many women, yes. Omega. Beta. And common. I wasn't a saint or an angel. I was a man and an Alpha. I was the product of my environment. All who came before Meadow had never given me the inclination to bring her into my personal space. To allow her to grow feelings for me day after day. And to allow her to nest. I'd cut ties before the former happened, but now...I felt I'd go crazy if Meadow just disappeared.

I'd never even kissed anyone before her. I thought she'd laugh at my attempts to please her, not just fuck her. But every moan and

purr that escaped her pretty lips had led me on.

My dick hardened at the thought of breeding her. My dick's head pulsed, and a wet spot formed on my shorts where pre-cum leaked out. I was in a full-on rut. Even the other Alphas smelled it when I had gone outside to take a piss in the middle of the night. Either way, they knew not to mess with me. They knew I had claimed Meadow. They smelled the pheromones around my temporary domain.

"Ugh..." Meadow exclaimed. She lifted herself up on her elbows. "Did I oversleep?"

"No. You can break your fast whenever you like. I saved you something to eat." I reached over to grab a basket of bread and berries I saved for her.

"Wait." She touched my forearm.

I turned, short of picking up the basket.

"I'm not hungry for that." Her hands molded to my chest, and her fingers moved between the ridges.

I gasped and bit my lip. "Meadow," I growled. I was two seconds away from flipping her over and fucking her into oblivion.

"If I could just have more of what we did last night. Just one more time..." She breathed, letting my overcoat drop. Her body was petite and athletic at the same time with curves in all the right places.

"Once more will never be enough," I replied. There wasn't any need to lie to ourselves. Our bodies were doing exactly what fate intended. An Alpha's purpose was to protect and breed. An Omega's place was with her Alpha.

I kissed her, and she parted her lips, immediately giving me her tongue.

"Xenon?" She pulled back. "If you can pull out before...you know..." Before I answered, she untied the drawstring holding my shorts to my waist and pulled out my throbbing dick.

I swallowed, knowing that if I entered her sweet pussy again it'd feel too much like paradise and it'd take heaven and hell and all of my willpower to pull out. "Okay. If that's what you want."

She squatted on her knees while I was still in the chair, and her gaze honed in on my erection. In both of her hands, she took my dick. My balls tightened, and my knot came alive. Veins along my shaft filled with blood, and it felt like I was going to blow instantly. She admired me, wrapping her small fingers around my erection.

I growled and she looked up at my face, licking her pretty lips before leaning forward to taste a drop of my pre-cum. I clenched my teeth together when she moaned in satisfaction.

"Mmmm." She licked her lips, flattening her tongue along the underside of my dick, coaxing more cum from the tip. She took me all the way down her throat, gagging when I reached her palate. When she couldn't take any more of me, she came up for air and then tried again.

I lifted her face upward, kissed and tasted her mouth, then grabbed clumps of her long, beautiful hair and guided her mouth up and down my stiff rod. *"Fuck,"* I bit out.

Her mouth moved from my shaft down to my testicles. She did all the right things, causing streams of my seed to escape. She sucked up every last drop, reveling in how good it tasted.

When she came up, her lips glistened with my seed. I could've burst right there and then from the sight of her beauty. I reached down, pumping and squeezing my cock.

"Come take what you need," I told her. "Don't worry about me."

With a bashful look, she lifted one leg over my lap and straddled me.

The look of pleasure that crossed her face when my tip speared her opening was priceless. Her slick coated me, allowing her to fully seat herself down on my cock. We both moaned when she hit rock bottom.

"Now, fuck me, Meadow."

She rode me expeditiously toward what I knew would be a spectacular end. I felt the moment a wave of ecstasy hit her. She came, vocally making her satisfaction known. Our lips touched and we panted. Our breaths were in unison with the rhythm she rode me in. She was slick and hot. Her pussy clenched me and sheathed my dick over and over again like a glove.

I started to knot but pulled back a few inches. "I'm going to come. I can't hold it."

"I don't want you to." Her lips pressed against my chest and she slid down to the hilt once again. I felt her teeth nip the skin there. Her instincts told her to do all the right things. No one had to tell her how to be an omega. It didn't matter how long she'd walked this earth not knowing that she was who she was. She was born with these compulsions. She was born for me.

She threw her head back and rode me faster, taking yet another

climax for herself. I did what I could to block my seed, but I was too far gone. Plus, she prevented every attempt I made to pull out. The knot swelled, locking within her.

"X!" she cried out.

I joined her in climax, spilling my Alpha seed in her omega womb.

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Chapter Seventeen

Meadow

If I'd known I'd have this throbbing between my legs and wouldn't be able to walk straight, I might've stayed in the tent like Xenon first suggested. I might've been a tomboy growing up, and let's be honest, I still was, but what woman didn't like to shop? Even if I only had one leg to hop on, I'd still go out to the markets.

The open market was just what it was named. An open market. It was *open* to everyone. No matter what sector you came from or who you had ties to, anyone could trade. And that's basically what happened. People came far and wide to trade whatever they had of value for whatever they needed. It wasn't as crowded as I remembered when I last came with the travelers several months ago, but that was to be expected because of the weather. The chilly bite of winter's approach kept many traders and merchants indoors. In fact, it was probably the last month that any sector, clan, or village would participate in trading before everyone buckled down in their home bases for winter.

I sighed. *Home base.* It was something I hadn't had for a long time. Something I wanted.

I sat under a tree next to Xenon and our bags as he napped while we waited for departure time. I didn't wake him, but usually he slept an hour or two and got right back up like clockwork. It hadn't even been an hour yet.

Apparently, he hadn't experienced a full night's sleep since his brother left. The guilt of letting his brother leave to spend his sentence alone had really gotten to him. I understood where he was coming from, but he had to realize that he wasn't responsible for his brother. They had separate lives before the murder was committed, and even if it hadn't been committed, he was still entitled to a life not dictated by family. We were alike in more ways than one. I made that same decision years ago, and I chose to leave Ocane with my mother. But now I was alone. I'd make the same decision again, so I never wanted people to feel sorry for me. Xenon believed in

fate. I believed we all made decisions that shaped our fate.

I glanced across the small pond as a group of other Alphas drank, and talked, and laughed together. They seemed to be so close. Of course, they were. They referred to each other as brothers. One thing I learned about them was that they were extremely possessive. As long as they weren't fighting over possession of something, everything was fine. They had rules in place, so that didn't happen often anymore.

By now, everyone in his clan knew I was an omega. According to Xenon, our mixed pheromones and the masking of my scent with his semen would stave off other Alphas indefinitely. But then there was this thing about Alpha omega bonding, which made things final. It was ultimately the omega's decision. The Alpha could take and claim all he wanted, but without a true mate-bond, it didn't matter how many times we had sex, nothing would be final. And we had a lot of sex. I promised myself I wouldn't be with men again until I settled. I broke that promise when I met Xenon. I wanted a family, but not like this. Not while I was homeless. I didn't want my son or daughter to be a scavenger. I wanted them to have a home.

I recalled an encounter I had with a merchant while Xenon took me shopping.

"Hello. I'm Lady Evaline Gardener. Can I help you?" The lady at the herbal stand tipped her straw hat.

I looked behind me to check on Xenon, who stood off to the side in conversation with another merchant.

I turned back around and cleared my throat. "Hello. Are you familiar with vitex and stoneseed root?"

The lady frowned, leaned over, and lowered her voice. "Yes. I have vitex. Plenty of it. But what do you need stoneseed root for? Are you in trouble?"

"No. I ran out a month ago."

"Don't you know what stoneseed root is for?"

I nodded. "Birth control, ma'am."

She shook her head. "Vitex is an effective birth control on its own. It's so effective in fact, you could take it the morning after and still be okay. Stoneseed root, on the other hand, is a suppressant."

"S-suppressant?" I swallowed.

She narrowed her gaze, looking behind me. "They are here, aren't they? Those Alphas. They've come here today." Her attention fell back

on me. “Where are you from?”

“Ocane. But I don’t live there anymore.”

“Ocane?” She pressed her hands against her chest. “So am I. Why are you so far away from home?”

“I left a long time ago.”

“What’s your surname?”

“Carver,” I replied. “Anyway, I can’t go back to Ocane. I left under undesirable circumstances. They’d never allow me back in.”

“Oh, hun…don’t worry. We have a new leader. Things are different now. If you wanted, you could always re-pledge allegiance and return.”

“I don’t think I’d want to. I don’t have family there.”

Her facial expression dropped the moment I smelled the aura of husk and sage on the wind. “Oh, God!” She looked behind me. “Are you an o—?”

Xenon pressed his big hand to the small of my back, silently announcing his presence. Naturally, my body caved back into his, welcoming his warmth and his protection.

A frightened look crossed the lady’s face.

Xenon leaned down and whispered, “Did you find something? Don’t worry about the price. I’ll get it.”

“No. It’s okay.” I started to back up, and Xenon followed me away from the merchant.

Later, while we were three posts down, a young girl came up to me while Xenon was preoccupied and pushed something into my palm. “From Lady Evaline.” Then she walked off.

I only needed to take one sniff of the satchel of herbs to recognize what was inside.

Vitex and stoneseed root. The most natural, effective birth control in all of the sectors.

Even as I had the thing right in my pants pocket, I had an urge to throw the satchel in the lake.

Suppressant? Why would they mix a suppressant with birth control and give it to women?

I already knew the answer.

Pushing all thoughts of my fears aside, I turned my attention back to the thing I was working on.

I held up a trinket I carved to pass the time and inspected it from all sides. Unhappy with the workmanship, I picked up the tool and started working at it again.

Xenon stirred next to me.

I smiled. “Hello, sleepyhead.”

He grinned, dragging himself up to lean back against the tree. “What’d I miss?”

“A jolly green giant came through? Asked me if I needed him to slay an Alpha?”

Xenon’s expression turned stoic. “Really? Where is he?”

I giggled. “Just kidding.”

He smiled, reached out, and slid his fingers against the back of my neck, pulling me close. We kissed, and suddenly everything on my mind flew away with the wind.

After the display of affection, I linked my forehead with his, closing my eyes as the feeling inside my core lingered on.

“You know there really are Alpha slayers roaming the forests, right?”

“No.”

“Don’t worry. They’ve been roaming since the day I was born. There’ll always be a threat, but that doesn’t keep me from living,” he said.

“I’d never let anyone slay you,” I said.

He stroked my face, leaned back against the tree, and propped his arms up on his knees. “I know. But it is my job to keep you safe, omega, not the other way around.”

“Oh, is that right? Because, you see, for you to keep me safe, you must stay alive.”

“I like that you know how to take care of yourself. Means you’ll be a great mother one day.”

I blushed. “I hope.”

“You will. You do want that, right?”

I nodded.

“Will you take your herbs then?”

I quickly glanced up, swallowing. “What herbs?”

“I can smell it on, you know? The stoneseed root?”

I gasped. “You know about that?”

“I saw when the young girl handed you the pouch. It’s here with us. I can still smell it.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” I asked.

“I figured you’d tell me when you were ready. I’m not the prying type.”

I sighed. “Since we’ve been having sex and it seems that I have

no control over what my body wants, I figured I should get back on birth control. I don't want to bring a baby into this world while I'm like this. I don't even have a place to lay my head at night."

"You do. You're with me. Whatever decision you make, you'll never be homeless, I promise."

"Thanks. But I'm still scared, I guess." I shrugged. "I had no idea that stoneseed root was added in as a suppressant. Did you?"

"My clan has known about the suppressant for a very long time. Vitex and stoneseed root were illegal herbs a long time ago. Many of the commoners had a hard time having babies, and they still do, so they outlawed anything that would keep their women from conceiving. The combination you speak of is only traded on the black market, and it was made specifically to keep Alphas from taking omegas. It fucks with an omega's smell. Her pheromones. We can't tell what she is, so we pass right by her. Unless, of course, the Alpha is in a rut and doesn't care who satisfies his cravings."

I wrung my hands in my lap. "I've been taking vitex since I hit puberty. It was only when we joined the dark travelers that we were offered a more potent form. At least, that's what they said."

"It's possible that the leader of the dark travelers required the women take it to keep Alphas away."

I nodded. "Of course. We traveled everywhere. That makes sense."

"It suppressed your pheromones and your heat cycles. It's why you didn't know you were an omega."

"I stopped taking them and then I met..."

"You met an Alpha. *Me.*"

"It should be a choice. They never should've been deceptive about what it was," I said.

"Very true. Now, let's try to understand it from their perspective. There was once a time when Alphas weren't as civilized as we are today. We hunted omegas like our lives depended on them. Our lives do depend on them, actually. It's how we ensure our race goes on, that we don't die out."

"Your clan hunted omegas?"

He nodded. "Not me. I was too young back then, but yes, my own father hunted, and my uncle did as well. Didn't matter if they were like us or human omegas with suppressed genes. They were scented, hunted, marked, and bred. Omegas were hunted so much that they felt afraid, not protected or appreciated by an Alpha as

they should've been. A group of them rebelled by hiring Alpha slayers, and most of them fled to protected lands never to be seen again. We lost over half of our omegas that way. The former Alpha leaders, Echo's bloodline—Primebloods, knew something had to change, so we set out to learn how to control ourselves in all aspects of life. Those who agreed stayed, and those who didn't left."

"Are omegas still living in your village?"

"Of course. They're not all afraid. Those who stay from birth until the end trust us with their very lives. During their heat cycles, they've learned how to stay inside. Also, most of them have an Alpha protecting them, whether it's their true bonded mate, a crazy-ass beta who's not afraid to kill, or an Alpha father, brother, or another strong male figure. Usually, it's the first or the latter. In some cases, they're like us—they take care of it."

I shook my head. "Take care of it? What do you mean?"

"They have an arrangement with an Alpha. It's nothing personal. For an omega, the pain of a heat cycle can be unbearable. And for an Alpha, a rut is like an unquenched hunger and it feels like we're walking around with stones for testicles."

I swallowed. "Oh. Do you have an arrangement, too?"

"No. I'm older now. I'm no longer an adolescent, young Alpha. I let my tracking and scavenging keep my mind off things when I think I'm about to go into a rut. Or I just squeeze out a nut myself."

I crossed my arms over my chest and looked him straight in the eye. "You can be straight with me. You've been with other women. Lot's of other women, haven't you?"

He looked off in the distance shamefully and then back at me. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Probably not."

He took my hand, interloping our fingers together. "You are the one, Meadow. The one omega for me."

"How do you know?" I challenged.

"I chased after you before I knew what you were. You wouldn't be here if you weren't. You wouldn't smell like heaven and paradise to me if you weren't. I wouldn't have masked you with my seed to keep other Alphas away if you weren't. You wouldn't make nests in my tent if you weren't. Your body knows. And you know. I wanted you then. I still want you now."

I leaned my head on his shoulder. "Tell me more. How can I be an omega?"

“It’s rare, but it’s possible. My parents were modified in a lab. Wolf DNA plus Alpha DNA equals a new species—*the uncaged*. Before us, there were Alphas, betas, and omegas living in this world. They were human, but they still presented as having an alternate gender. Perhaps there was even a secret society of them before the earth went to shit. You carry the genes from an omega or an Alpha. Or both. Their genes may have been suppressed in you, and maybe even your mother. Your family might not have known. But the gene is no longer suppressed inside of you.”

“You’re right. My mother didn’t know a thing. She wouldn’t have kept this from me. She doesn’t even know who my father was. Lots of male travelers came through Ocane back when it was a free sector when she was a carefree teenager. She got pregnant, and here I am.”

He picked up the piece I carved while he slept.

Using a chisel, I had carved out a yin yang symbol into a circular cut of wood, complete with two interlocking spirals. But in the place of two dots, I had carved the symbols for Alpha and Omega.

“You’re good,” he said.

“I told you. I’m a carver.”

His eyes lit up like a light bulb. “Carver. Meadow Carver.”

I nodded. “In Ocane, if you have a notable profession, you take a surname that suits it.”

“Ah, I have heard something of the sort. It’s similar to us. I am Xenon Moonblood. A Moonblood by birth.”

“What does it mean?”

“Originally, there were five notable leaders, including the first Alpha of Alphas, Max Primeblood. There was Greyblood, Nightblood, Blueblood, Moonblood, and Primeblood—which means the first blood. Max Primeblood owned the land. All of Mistacre and Northgarde. When he left, the land was passed down between Primebloods. Always Primebloods. If you come across an Alpha that introduces themselves as one of those five, that means their roots can be traced back to when our parents and grandparents were uncaged from the labs.”

“That’s so cool.”

He leaned over and kissed me on my exposed shoulder, rubbing the mark of the dark travelers.

I sighed. “I suppose I’ll never forget my time with the travelers.”

“You should never forget.”

“Be honest. I’m sure your people will wonder about this mark if they see it.”

“The only mark my people acknowledge is the mark between an Alpha and his omega, and of course, the symbol of our most respected Alpha. They won’t hold your past against you, because you haven’t done anything wrong. I—”

Before he expanded further, we both heard the call from Axil that it was time to leave the market and head out. There was only one more day until we got to Mistacre. I looked forward to it.

While Xenon helped some of the others load stuff into the wagons, a couple of betas dragged two strangers out into the open and tossed them on the ground.

Axil tossed a heavy chest onto the wagon and growled in a huff. “What is this?”

“Get a load of this, Greyblood.” One of the young Alphas tossed a sack on the ground, revealing several bottles of moonshine. “We caught the bastards that stole our shine while we were at the market. We told you we’d get him. Scavengers.”

The two scavengers begged and pleaded to be let go.

“Get the moonshine,” Axil instructed.

Some betas came forward to pick the sacks up and haul them into the back of the wagon.

The Alpha took it upon himself to punch one of the scavengers in the face.

“Leave them be!” Axil yelled. “Which one of you was supposed to be watching our shit? Get it together. They could’ve walked off with the whole lot!”

The young Alphas said nothing, but the guilty looks on their faces said it. With a rough push to the backs of the scavengers, the Alphas charged off.

Axil walked up to scavengers and said, “Take from us again, and you’ll both lose a hand.”

They scurried away as a crowd of bystanders laughed.

I looked up at Xenon. “Greyblood, huh?”

He chuckled. “And he’s supposed to be the calmest of us all.”

“Guess no one should get on your bad side, then,” I teased.

“Not when it comes to who or what I covet most.”

He kissed my forehead, and I wrapped my arms around his waist.

I'd go with Xenon to Mistacre. There wasn't any other place I'd rather be.

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Chapter Eighteen

Meadow

Mistacre.

I would've never guessed that Xenon's village would be so beautiful. With views of the mountains and picturesque scenes of nature in its undisturbed form, I was taken aback by the tranquility. The entrance of the main villa was situated near a large river. Boats were out on the water, and people sat ashore with their fishing rods. Even before I came into the village, I heard children playing, dashing across paths and walkways with no sign of fear on their faces.

When the Alphas arrived, everyone ran out to welcome them back. It seemed as if the whole villa came alive.

"You look surprised," Xenon exclaimed.

"I was made to believe that your clan lived among a city of ruins." I shook my head. "How silly of me to believe that and all the other lies I was told."

"We let them believe we live amongst ruins. We once did, but not anymore."

Axil Greyblood fell in step beside Xenon and handed him a bag filled with supplies they'd picked up along the way. "I'm going to leave these to you, brother. You'll know what to do with them."

Xenon slung the strap across his shoulder. "I'll show you what I come up with. Give me a week or two."

Axil shifted his gaze to me. "Meadow. It was nice to meet you again."

I smiled. "And you too." I held out my hand to Axil just as normal people do when they meet and depart and was quite surprised when Xenon casually blocked my attempt, placing my hand on his arm, instead.

Axil's lips twitched in amusement. "We'll talk again soon." He didn't seem disturbed by what Xenon did, so it must've been normal for them.

"Why did you do that?" I asked quietly as Axil turned to leave.

“Alpha pheromones sweat from every pore on the skin. Same for beta and common men, but theirs isn’t as strong. You risk rendering my masking ineffective if you touch another Alpha. He understands that, too. He wouldn’t have disrespected me in that way by accepting your hand. Axil’s my brother. I trust him.”

“No wonder he hesitated when I tried to shake his hand. Good to know.” I grinned and then teased, “You’d be jealous if I shook another man’s hands?”

He nodded and smiled sheepishly. “I would be. I’m not going to lie. Come. I’ll show you where I live.”

Just as we stepped away from the crowd, I spotted a young woman with cinnamon-brown hair colliding with Axil. He welcomed her with open arms, and she wrapped her legs around his back. They might’ve said two words to each other, and then they were kissing like they hadn’t seen each other in weeks.

They parted just a moment before Axil offered the young woman another smaller bag he held. She dipped her hand inside and pulled out what looked like some art supplies before rising to her tiptoes to kiss him again.

I blushed at their public displays of affection. Heat rose up my chest, and I felt a tingling sensation between my legs. But their love towards each other wasn’t the only thing that piqued my curiosity.

I felt Xenon’s lips on the back of my neck. “Might I also add that seeing another Alpha and Omega making out will cause your heat to rise?”

I closed my eyes, relishing in the warmth flooding me as he kissed the column of my neck.

I turned around in Xenon’s arms and whispered, “I think I know that woman. I’ve seen her before, I think.”

“Axil’s mate. You probably have. She’s from Legance. He took her a few weeks ago. That’s part of what started it all.”

I looked again at the departing couple. “No. This woman looked almost exactly like her, but she had some gray hair. I haven’t see her recently. I didn’t see her in Legance. Maybe she has an older sister. Anyway, it’s nothing.” I shook my head. “Take me to see your home, Alpha.”

Xenon scooped me up and hauled me off.

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Chapter Nineteen

Meadow

We slept for a whole day. I'd never been so tired in my life. I guess that's what traveling with seven-foot-tall Alphas did to a woman. The last time Xenon came home, he had just arrived back from a scouting trip before Axil recruited him for the last mission, so the fridge and pantry were a little short of food.

I took the time to enjoy the bath while Xenon went out to get staples for the kitchen. Even though I was warm inside Xenon's cozy cabin, there was no mistaking the changing of seasons in the air. Perhaps Xenon and his clan had come at just the right time. I would be lost in the woods by now with no hope or direction with winter approaching.

I sensed the moment Xenon came back into the house. The screened door clapped shut, followed by the sound of the door being closed. A moment of shuffling and scraping in the next room told me he was poking at the fireplace.

I exhaled and sunk deeper into the water. I was safe here. This wasn't a prison. No one would poke and pry at me to decide if I was fertile. No one would send me off to some auction to be sold to a future husband that I had nothing in common with.

I picked up the vial of cleansing oil and squeezed it out onto a sponge. Starting with my neck and shoulders, I rubbed the fragrant soap all over my skin.

I didn't expect Xenon to open the door without warning. I might have been irritated if it were any other person, but not with Xenon. His seven-foot-tall massive body filled the door frame. Scents of husk and sage overcame me. I reacted both physically and mentally to his presence. I didn't know it was possible to feel the slick melting from me while I was still underwater, but it happened. My nipples tightened, and I was instantly aroused.

No matter how many times we had sex. I still craved him. I needed him.

"Xenon?"

A feral growl erupted from deep in his chest. “Meadow.”

My insides heated, and a sharp cramp rose up my side. I gasped and dropped the sponge in the water. Xenon shoved off his overcoat and was at the tub’s side in moments, picking me up out of the water and sitting me down on the ledge. Sweet-smelling slick leaked from my pussy and onto the tiles.

I panted. “How is this still happening? We’ve fucked a dozen times. Oh, God…I need more.”

I pulled his lips down to mine and kissed him hastily. I reached into his trousers and wrapped my fingers around his cock. He was hard as a rock, but the more I stroked him, the more he grew in girth and length.

“You know why this is happening, Meadow,” he moaned against my lips. “It’s nature’s way of pulling us together. To bond. To breed. Do you want this to stop?”

“No,” I answered quickly. “Never. I never want this feeling to end. The hunger from wanting you is insane, but when we’re like this, when we finally come together, it feels like heaven.”

“I’m glad you feel the same as I do. I want to claim you as mine forever, but the decision to submit rests with you.”

“Submit?” I gasped as he took a sensitive nipple between his lips and sucked. “I thought I was submitting.”

“You’ve submitted your body, yes. To be my omega and mine only, you must submit in total.”

“But how—”

Xenon slipped one of my thighs over his shoulders, and his lips descended on my wet pussy. He wasted no time lapping at the juices that spilled from my sex. I grabbed onto the edge of the tub with a fierce grip, praying I didn’t fall back into the water. He gripped my hips and held me to his mouth, teasing my clit with precision. As his fingers dug into the soft flesh of my ass, I cried out his name over and over again. I begged him to fuck me so I could feel his knot and his seed filling me up to the max.

He edged me toward the ultimate climax and then scooped me up from the ledge. Everything happened so fast I hardly had time to catch my breath. My back hit the opposite wall at the same time his massive length thrust deep into my sex. He took me over the edge as soon as he slammed to the hilt. I wrapped my legs around his waist and threaded my fingers through his hair. My slick coated his shaft, creating friction and absolute pleasure for both of us.

Gentle wasn't what I craved. He knew it. And he delivered. He plundered into me with a force that rocked me out of this world. When his knot locked inside of me, his body began to tremble. He pumped his hot seed into me while declaring I was his omega.

Like always, he was still knotted inside of me after I milked the last of his seed from him. Without adjusting the position, he carried me into the bedroom and brought us down gently on the bed.

He stroked my hair, and I smiled.

"This is too good to be true," I said.

"No, Meadow. This is what was intended. This is fate."

Later, while we were still laying side by side, Xenon asked, "After winter and once the first sign of spring breaks, would you like to take a vacation with me?"

I grinned and nodded. "Yes. I would."

"I thought you loved to travel. That's partly why you stayed with them so long after, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "I figured I couldn't have both."

"Well, you can. You can have it all." After a moment, he said, "Actually, you inspire me to go further than I've ever gone before. I've been into other territories, but never far enough. I stayed within my comfort zone."

"Sometimes it's good to step out of your comfort zone."

"Yes. I should take a page from your book and Echo's book and all the other Alpha's books. Many Alphas have left here and stayed away for months on various missions and still come back, and everything was still the same. I fear too much might change if I stay away too long."

"Now you have me. We can go together. You don't have to be alone." I gave him a quick kiss. "And of course, things might change. How would we ever move forward if they don't? Besides, maybe you'll learn more about where your brother may have run off to."

"Maybe." His gaze shifted downward as if he was deep in thought.

"Xenon?"

"Yes."

"Who's Echo? You mentioned him once as a notable Alpha, but I've met every notable Alpha except for him. And you keep saying he has some connection to the Romanys that once lived here. Who is he really?"

He caught my gaze. “When I went to get groceries, I learned that Echo has just returned. You’ll find out soon. Also, I talked to Axil. After learning that you were in Legance for about a month, Karis would like to meet you.”

“Karis? You mean the woman who was with Axil when we first got here.”

“Yep.”

“Yes, I just can’t shake the feeling that we may have something in common,” I said.

“You’re both omegas, for one.”

I giggled. “Yeah, that too.”

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Chapter Twenty

Meadow

The last thing I wanted to do was get on Karis's bad side. I was almost certain she had a lookalike somewhere, and I finally realized where I once saw that person. Anchora.

Even now, I watched as she laughed at something Axil whispered in her ear. They petted each other under the dinner table and stole many kisses. Their connection made me smile and think about how it would be between Xenon and me.

I glanced at him sitting beside me and blushed. Thank the gods that we had two rounds of sex before coming over to Axil's for dinner. I didn't know what I'd do if I went straight into heat while here.

"Axil told me that you're a carver," Karis said, picking up her glass of water and taking a sip.

I nodded. "Yes. In Ocane, I made small trinkets like jewelry boxes, wooden pendants, small sculptures...things like that. When my mother and I moved away, our skills were adapted to make animal traps for food."

"That's neat. It'll be nice to have another artist to talk to. I used to paint in Legance, and now, since everyone here knows that, I've gotten quite a few requests for tattoo designs. Where have you traveled?"

"Mostly out this way. Out west. Northern Nova is as far as I've gone."

"Wow. I was in Legance all my life before I got here. Never been anywhere else."

"Have you ever been to Anchora?" I asked.

She frowned.

Before Xenon and I came, he'd told me that Karis had a rough life. It also came as a surprise to me that she had just learned her real father was Arthur Wynnell, who was also Leon's father and the man Leon killed to secure the governor's position in Legance. All of her life, she had been lied to. And here I was, upset about being led

on by the side effects of an herbal concoction.

"I'm sorry." I shook my head. "You just look like someone I've seen before."

"You've been in Anchora?" she asked

I nodded. "Yes. It was a long time ago. After we left Ocane with the travelers, their next stop was Anchora."

"I was born in Anchora," Karis said as Axil placed a supportive hand on her back.

"You look so familiar. When I saw you the first time the other day, it was almost like having déjà vu. There was this woman…your sister maybe…she visited our Romany leader once."

"But I…I don't think I have a sister," Karis stuttered. "I have a stepsister on my father's side, but she looks nothing like me."

"Well, this woman looked just like you. Same eyes, same hair color, but um, just a little gray."

"When was this?" she asked.

"A couple of years ago, maybe. I was eavesdropping when I shouldn't have been. Our leader called her by name. Janna or Joan. *Joella.* It was Joella."

She gasped. "Joella is my mother."

I looked back and forth between Karis and Axil.

"It's okay, Axil. I'm okay," Karis reassured him, and then glanced back up at me. "I lost my mother a while back."

"I'm so sorry. I lost mine, too. She was sick."

Karis reached across the table with her palm up. We gave each other's hand a reassuring squeeze. She cracked a smile. "I can't believe you saw her there. I didn't know she went back. She said she'd never return to Anchora."

"It was just that one time I saw her," I replied.

Karis squeezed my hand again. "Tell me. What did you hear? What did you see? Please. Tell me everything."

"She came to him for help."

"What was his name? This person that gave her help."

I glanced down at the table. "We were told to call him King, that's all. There were liaisons between us and him. I never spoke to him directly. He barely ever showed his face. If your mother saw him in person, she must've gotten special permission to do so. And that is rare."

She sighed. "My mother had a way with men. She got her way all the time. Well, most of the time."

“I recalled seeing her walk into his tent. I stopped to listen. I’m not sure why I was eavesdropping. I could’ve gotten into trouble. I guess I was just curious about him at that time since he always stayed hidden. Your mother asked him for help.”

“H-help?”

“She asked him to *make it stop*. I thought it was odd.”

Karis frowned. “Make what stop?”

“Her sexual urges. I think she was having trouble being faithful in her marriage. I’m sorry…I shouldn’t—”

“No. Please go on. I know already. She wasn’t in love with my stepdad. What happened? Did she get help?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. He said it was too late for her. He said, *‘I can’t help you, Joella. Coming here was a waste of time for both of us.’* He said too many unsuppressed cycles had passed. She begged him to fix her. Said she’d even give herself over to him.”

“Wonder what he meant by unsuppressed cycles?”

Axil turned inward to speak directly to Karis. “If your mother was an omega, then she had heat cycles. Remember what we talked about. Heat cycles can happen a couple of times a month or several times a year, depending on the omega’s circumstances. Even more in the presence of an Alpha.”

“That makes sense. She left with something in her hand. It looked an awful lot like the same thing that my mother kept our vitex and stoneseed root inside,” I said.

“What’s vitex and stoneseed root?” Karis asked.

Axil and Xenon exchange glances.

“It’s a heat suppressant and birth control for omegas,” Axil answered.

Karis looked confused. “I’ve never heard about this.”

“The herb is probably outlawed in Legance; its leaders don’t believe in birth control for women. Instead, they keep their women under lock and key within the sector.”

“You’re right about that,” Karis said. “All medicinals and herbs had to be approved before entering the sector, and then it was taxed heavily when it was sold. Even then, not many people could afford those things. And if they could afford it, then finding access to it was difficult. The Wynnells would’ve made it that way. That’s how they controlled us without physically controlling us, if you get what I’m saying.” She sighed. “But now that you’ve said something, my mother drank some kind of weird-smelling tea for about a week,

and then she disappeared, and then she came back. I thought things were going to be fine and that she and my stepdad had made up for her running off without saying anything. A couple of days later she disappeared again and when my stepdad went searching for her, they found her at the bottom of a ravine. She had taken off her clothes and neatly folded them up before jumping to her death."

"I'm sorry," I said as Karis shed tears. "I feel bad that I had to bring you this news."

"No, it's okay. I'm sad, but I'm also happy to know she tried to get help. That King person was probably right. He couldn't help her. She was suffering from something far worse than an omega's heat cycle."

That evening, we said no more about Karis's mother, or Legance, or Anchora. But Karis and I did agree to get together within the next couple of days.

As Xenon and I were walking back to the cabin, I exhaled, "It was so good to get something off my chest. A person can only keep so many secrets before it affects them, you know."

Xenon hugged me close. "You're right. And you brought Karis the peace she needed. I felt it in the room. She was at ease when you told her this. She has Axil. She'll be okay."

"I hope so."

We turned the corner, and a rambunctious crowd of Alphas stood outside a large bungalow. You would've thought something very eventful was going on by the way they cheered loudly and passed around bottles of moonshine and whiskey.

We had to pass by to get back to Xenon's home. On the other hand, I noted that a smile spread across Xenon's lips when we got closer.

"It's him. It's Echo, isn't it?"

"They're cheering. Looks like everyone misses him." I said, watching the festivities from the back.

"Yeah, and he's probably got hella loot to share on that table up there," Xenon exclaimed. "I won't worry about it. It's nothing I can't find on my own. I'll catch up with him later. Let's get home. I want you in our nest."

I smiled and then blushed as heat swelled within my core. I grabbed Xenon's collar and balanced myself on tiptoes to give him a long, deep kiss.

During our intimate moment, the crowd parted ways to allow a

few people to leave. My eyes focused on a beast of an Alpha with long blue-black hair and a strict demeanor. He was dark, and he looked dangerous. Despite the laughter and celebration around him, there was not a smile on his face. I knew it was him. Primeblood. Alpha of Alphas.

His solemn gaze swept the area, and it landed on me...and stayed on me. His line of sight shifted from head to toe and back up again. There was no emotion on his face.

"He knows about me, doesn't he?" I whispered without taking my eyes from Echo.

"Of course, he knows," Xenon whispered back, and then he swooped me up. "Doesn't matter. Guess why?"

"Why?" I giggled.

"Because you are my omega to keep."

I knew where this was going, and I could hardly wait to be alone behind closed doors with him.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Meadow

A couple of days passed, and although Xenon and I spent most of our time in bed, the other half of our time was devoted to other duties. As one of the Alphas that people looked up to, Xenon had important matters to tend to during the day. I still had more to learn about how the community was run, but I was getting the hang of it. Most of the rules were lax. People just used common sense. There was hardly anything at all to disagree about, except for when two Alphas wanted something that there was only one of. I'd seen the fights happen in the courtyard, but in the end, everything was worked out.

I'd been anxious to walk the village with Karis like we planned, but because she had recently gone into another intense heat cycle, Axil forbade her from leaving her nest. Karis's problem was a nice problem to have. What omega wouldn't want an Alpha doting over her all day long.

On this night, it was my turn to make dinner for Xenon and me. I had insisted, but I lacked one ingredient to make something he never had but wanted to try, and it just so happened to be something I had not indulged in since I left Ocane.

One of the merchant huts was just across the road from Xenon's hut, so knowing that I could make it there and be back in ten minutes, top, I tossed on one of Xenon's overcoats, grabbed a basket, items to trade with, and left to go get what I needed.

It didn't take me long to secure the heavy cream that I needed to make homemade ice cream. He even had a couple of cups of freshly picked strawberries available, and I bought some of those, too.

I was halfway back across the road when I spotted someone that almost made me drop my basket.

Hopping on crutches and a bandaged leg, the Alpha Balto stopped in his tracks. His eyes widened, and he shoved the crutches to the ground. Even with his injured leg, he began eating up the distance toward me.

“Look what you did to me, omega,” Balto bit out.

I took a step back, and on instinct, reached for my knife. Only, it wasn’t there. Of course, it wasn’t there. I had gotten so used to defending myself, but I was no longer a traveler needing protection from thieves and vagabonds. I didn’t need it. But now, I wasn’t sure that was true anymore.

“I knew you were an omega. Just knew it. Just my luck. Someone has dragged you here from that dreadful sector. Who was it? Have they fucked you yet?” Balto sniffed and then grabbed my forearm and squeezed hard. “You didn’t even apologize, omega. But —”

Xenon came out of nowhere and tackled Balto to the ground. They both delivered hard punches at each other, hooking each other in the face.

“Oh, no, no...” I exclaimed.

The basket slipped from my hand, and the glass bottle broke and fresh cream seeped out into the earth.

“I warned you, Balto,” Xenon growled, holding the blade of a large machete to Balto’s throat. “I warned you I’d kill you if you touched her again.”

Kneeling on the ground, Balto held out his arms in a sign of submission. “Go on then. Kill me.”

The machete pierced Balto’s skin just enough to draw blood. As I looked at Xenon, I saw that his eyes were now laced with malice. He was capable of killing for what he wanted, but I wouldn’t stand here and see him murder another Alpha and regret it later.

“Xenon, no. Stop. Don’t do it.”

“I can barely walk!” Balto spat on the ground.

Echo pushed through the crowd and said, “We can see that, Balto. You will heal. Be a man about it. No Alpha gets cut by an omega and then cries about it. She is claimed. You cannot punish her. Get up!”

Balto got up, but Xenon still held the blade to his jugular.

Echo frowned. “If you want to kill him, kill him. Your decision will be on your conscience. Go on. Reactivate the cycle of violence between brothers. Kill him.”

Xenon’s chest rose and fell.

“Xenon,” I said softly, coming to his side.

When I touched his forehead, he lowered the machete.

“All I wanted was an apology, omega!” Balto stated.

I turned, fury tripping through me at the audacity. “Are you serious? You won’t get an apology acting like that. I don’t regret that you are hopping around on one leg. You tried to rape me and the girl before me. You were out of control. I don’t know who you think I am, but no apologies will come from me. Do you understand?”

An appalled Balto looked to Echo, but Echo folded his arms across his chest. “You heard her.”

Balto frowned and huffed. “So, we are even, then. I won’t fault you for it anymore.”

I nodded. “Good. And I wish you a speedy recovery.”

Xenon handed the machete back to Balto. “Next Alpha who touches what I have claimed will be a dead Alpha. And I am prepared to pay the price.”

“You’ve made your point, X,” Echo stated. “And nice keeping your temper in check, Moonblood.”

Xenon slid his arm around my waist and gently brought me to his side. “I’m not sure why you left my cabin, Meadow,” he said calmly as the crowd dispersed.

“For cream.”

“Cream?”

I shrugged. “I wanted to make ice cream for dessert.”

“You don’t have to go through so much trouble. By the way, when you tell me what you need, I will bring it for you.”

“It’s not like you have walkie-talkies or anything like that where I can just page you and say, ‘hey, we’re out of cream.’”

“Actually, I do. Somewhere in a chest under some floorboards in the house. It just needs batteries, which we’re extremely short on.”

“Packrat,” I teased, then giggled.

He winked. “You like it.”

“Indeed,” I agreed, swiping a smudge of blood from above his eyebrow. “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Meadow

Later that night while Xenon cut logs out back to refill the fireplace, I took a long bath, using the cleansing oils to wash away the distress from earlier and any pheromones that may have transferred to me from the other Alpha. I knew Alphas didn't like the scent of another man on their omegas, and when I presented myself to him, I wanted to do it with a clean slate.

I'd been thinking about doing this very thing for days. I was nervous as heck. I had planned to ask for guidance from Karis, but since she was having a bit of a predicament herself with her own heat cycle, I was on my own.

I stepped out of the bathtub, dried off, and then slipped into one of Xenon's overcoats. By that time, I heard him dumping logs into the crate in the next room. Slick melted down my inner thighs, but the thought of him shirtless, tossing big logs around like it was nothing, fueled my cravings. My nipples beaded as I caught a glance of myself in front of the full-body mirror. My skin glowed, and a blush filled my cheeks. Just thinking about how Xenon's hands would be all over me tonight had me slipping my fingers down my midsection to touch my clit.

"Meadow," Xenon called out.

I jumped. "Yes? I'm in the bedroom."

Knowing that he'd be in there soon, I began gathering up blankets, throws, and an assortment of pillows and tossing them on the bed.

"You okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine," I called back out.

"I'll be in there in a minute. I just have to put away some stuff."

I used the pillows to form a large circle in the center of the bed.

"Hey, I can bring you some tea when I get back inside. You want some?"

"I'm okay..."

The back door slammed shut, so Xenon must have gone back

outside to finish his work.

Purposely building a nest and subconsciously building a nest were two different things. Even before I knew what this all meant, I had built a nest inside of the tents Xenon and I stayed in. I had not known what I was doing then. I just felt I needed something comfortable and warm to sleep in. I wanted to feel safe and secure. Now I built the nest for a similar purpose, only this time would be different.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Xenon

Grinning, I took the small bowl of ice cream from the freezer. I had acquired it from the bakery shop just down the road right before chopping the wood so I could surprise her tonight. Meadow deserved everything she wanted, and I was going to give it to her. Nothing would destroy what we had. Not even a jealous Alpha who refused to control himself.

When I pushed the bedroom door, the sight before me took my breath away. In the center of the bed and in her nest, Meadow sat. The pile of blankets and pillows was perfectly placed in a circle around her. My large overcoat swallowed up her smaller form, but to see her wearing my garment awakened something deep inside me.

"Meadow," I breathed.

"I'm ready to submit, Xenon."

Her lavender scent hit me like a ton of bricks. The scent of her sweet-smelling slick beckoned to me. I placed the bowl of ice cream down on the stand near the door and began tearing my clothes off.

My balls were instantly rock hard and my cock stood at strict attention as I closed the distance between us.

She welcomed me into her arms. Her lips were too tempting not to kiss, and soon, our tongues dueled. I devoured her with my mouth, lifting her chin and pressing firm kisses to her throat.

She leaned forward and gained the upper hand by pushing me back until I rested on my forearms. When she bent low to collect the beads of pre-cum draining from my dick, I grabbed at the sheets, willing myself to be patient.

Taking me in both of her hands, she took the head of my cock in her mouth and slid down as far as she could go. She kissed down the length of me and then traced the thickest vein back up to the tip.

When I thought I couldn't take any more of her teasing, she straddled me, lining my shaft with her slick-drenched pussy. I

encircled her waist with my hands and thrust upward into her sweet sex. A look of pure ecstasy crossed her face when I reached the hilt, and the only word I could use to describe that moment was perfection. Meadow was beautiful perfection.

She began to move her hips up and down, impaling herself on my cock over and over again until she reached a climax. I allowed her to take charge, setting the rhythm she wanted, but I still couldn't keep my mouth off her.

"My omega," I proclaimed as she came again.

"Yes, Xenon, I'm yours." She placed her mouth against my chest and gently nipped and licked me just below the collarbone.

"Do it, omega," I urged. "Claim me, and I am your Alpha for eternity."

She didn't hesitate; she buried her sharp teeth into my chest and delivered the claiming bite.

I didn't think my dick could get any harder, but it did.

Taking her off guard, I flipped us over and bent her forward in the nest. Her face was on a pillow, and her ass was high in the air. I squeezed her backside and then brought my palm down across her checks with abrupt force.

"Xe—"

I cut off her scream by driving every inch of my dick into her pussy. Her creamy walls began milking me instantly. My knot swelled along my shaft, filling her sex to the max.

I bent over her while thrusting in and out, allowing my hips to mash against her ass and my balls to collide with her clit. I growled out in pleasure and then kissed her in the delicate place where her neck and shoulder met. The completion of our mate bond happened almost instantaneously. The moment I delivered my claiming bite to her flesh, my knot locked inside her.

She screamed out her climax as I pumped streams of seed into her womb.

I extracted my incisors just before collapsing against her. While spooning her, I wrapped my arms around her as she rested on the sheets.

"Omega, now you are claimed," I rasped against her throat.

"It was amazing. It's true now. I have an Alpha."

"You'll always have me, Meadow."

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Meadow

"We should get back. It's getting cold."

Xenon stood by the river as I collected stones to infuse onto a miniature trinket box I was making.

"Coming. Just give me a sec." I shifted the stones in my palm, letting the sand slip back into the water. I pushed the stones and shells down into a drawstring pouch and slipped them into my coat pocket.

Xenon helped me up and then pulled me into his arms for a long kiss. Instant heat radiated between us.

"I'm not worried one bit about the cold. I have you to keep me warm." I snuggled against him, burying my face against his chest and inhaling his scent. This was the plus side of being mate-bonded to an Alpha. Their body temperatures were normally two to five degrees higher than a human's.

He grinned. "Oh yeah? Well, my warmth comes at a price."

"Do I at least get the red light special?" I teased.

He chuckled. "You're cute, so I'll make a deal with you. But first..."

"What?"

His fingers trailed along the nape of my neck, then he quickly tugged at the pin holding my hair up in a bun. "The last one back is the rotten egg." He took off.

"Hey!" I exclaimed, taking off after him.

When I finally caught up, we fell to the ground just outside the cabin in a heap of arms and legs. I pounced on top, pinning him to the ground. After blowing my hair out my face, I declared, "You cheated."

"You're supposed to be faster than me, omega."

"Whatever..." I leaned down and kissed him.

Every day was like a honeymoon for us, and I loved it. Our light pecks turned into deep, passionate kissing. This was our life now, and some nights we didn't even make it to the nest.

We were so caught up in the moment that we didn't hear when someone walked right up to us.

A man cleared his throat. We separated.

I tossed my hair out of the way and glanced up into the deep blue eyes of Echo Primeblood.

"I was wondering when you two would get back," he said.

Sooner or later, I knew Echo would come asking about my past —a past that was indirectly tied to my former group. I wondered why he waited so long. Days had passed since he had returned from his trip.

My lips parted. "Echo."

"Hello, Meadow Carver."

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Meadow

Xenon and Echo passed a bottle of moonshine back and forth. I needed something a little lighter...well, a lot lighter, so I opted for homemade wine. We sat together in the living room in front of the fireplace with oil burning in lamps in all corners of the room.

I sat across Xenon's lap like we did most nights. Nothing had changed now that another Alpha was present. I was no longer threatened by the mere presence of Echo, Alpha of Alphas. If Xenon called him a beloved friend and a brother, I knew he couldn't be all that bad. Then again, looks were deceiving.

Echo was seated in the recliner to the right of us.

"I won't waste time here tonight," Echo said. "I contemplated not even coming to you about this, but these memories are now riding me like a vindictive hag."

"Well, that's no good," I said.

"You wear the mark of a follower. Were you devout?" Echo asked.

"Not devout, but I respected those who were. I didn't stick around long enough to be committed. And to be truly accepted, I would've had to marry into their faith since I wasn't born into it."

"Well, good thing you did not. Xenon would be still out there looking for gold," Echo teased. "Xenon says they helped your mother through a sickness."

I nodded. "They did."

"He has powers he shouldn't have, this so-called leader of the dark travelers. He still calls himself King," Echo said, frowning.

"I've never met him. I was never part of the inner circle. There were close to two hundred of us at any given time, maybe more. He stayed to himself. He had maids, servants, women, and wives who did everything for him. Even when there was a celebration, he remained untouchable on a pedestal. I didn't pay any mind to it. I was planning to leave, anyway. I only stayed and worked because of my mother."

“Yet, you will be forever scarred because you stayed,” Echo stated.

I shifted uncomfortably. I knew exactly what he was referring to, and it wasn’t my mark. “I try to forget that a jealous bitch tried to kill me. I don’t hold the entire group accountable for her self-serving actions.”

“When people try to take your life, you remember it. There’s no forgetting that,” Echo replied bluntly.

“You want something from me, don’t you? You want to do more than just talk about them.”

“You’re right. I do. I know you are loyal, and I know Xenon is in love with you. I trust you, Meadow Carver. I’ve been backstabbed just like you, but I, however, seek ultimate revenge. This group doesn’t remain in one place for long. They are secretive, and they haul ass the moment someone learns about how they operate. You weren’t privy to the works of the inner circle, I know. By bringing in non-devout followers like you, they imitate behaviors of normalcy and civility to fool those they wish to take advantage of. They’ve been running for years from us. I trust that you can tell me exactly where the dark travelers have settled for the winter.”

I stiffened. “You mean to go kill someone, don’t you? In that case, I can’t.”

“I’m not angry with all of them. Just a few of them. And the crime they committed cannot go unpunished.”

I shook my head. “I can’t do that. No.”

Xenon and Echo exchanged glances. As if they had read each other’s minds or communicated telepathically, Echo stood. “I won’t agonize your omega anymore. I apologize.”

At that moment, I felt sorry for Echo. His shoulders were now slumped, which was a sudden change from his earlier demeanor. Some awful memory caused by the dark travelers must’ve haunted him all these years. He looked like a lost soul.

“Echo?”

He paused.

“Tell me what they did. What did they do to you?”

“After they left, we were a mess. Brother fought against brother. They destroyed my family. And they burned my brother alive. I couldn’t save him. When I pulled him out of the fire, I didn’t even recognize him.”

“I—” My hand went to my chest, and I couldn’t find the words

to console him.

He lowered his head and turned on his heels. Echo's hand was on the doorknob when I stopped him.

"Wait! I want to help."

Echo turned around.

"Do you have a map?" I asked.

"Yes." He nodded.

"I'm not just talking a regular map. I mean a map with sector, clan, and village boundaries? It needs to be detailed."

"Omega, I have traveled far and wide. I have a map of everything."

Echo left, and thirty minutes later, he returned with a map of New America, as the travelers called it.

While leaning over the kitchen table, Echo, Xenon, and I discussed boundary lines and what we knew of newly developed and fallen villages and clans. Between the three of us, we had spent so much time traveling that we could name almost every major landmark on and off the map.

Sooner or later, we noticed a pattern. Our predictions led us to believe that we knew exactly where the dark travelers would settle for the winter.

That night, Echo promised me one thing that put my mind at ease: All innocents would be spared.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

A week later...

Xenon

I dumped a large container of firewood into the wagon and watched as Meadow searched for me. I'd never get tired of watching her. She was certainly one of a kind. She fit in perfectly as she maneuvered through the crowd, trying to find me.

Finally, she spotted me and came rushing over. She held out a drawstring bag filled with colorful toys.

"A bag of plastic water guns? Really, Xenon?" She placed her hand on her hips.

"What? I never know when I might need to shoot up a few cougars. Wish I had brought those along with me to Legance. I could've saved an arrow." I fought the urge to grin when she rolled her eyes.

She swatted me on the chest and shook her head. "I know these toys aren't for you."

"Seriously...I was wondering where I put those. I was going to hand them out to the kids when I got back last time and forgot."

"Oh, well, there are a lot of kids playing by the lake. Would you mind if I handed them out now?"

"Go ahead," I told her.

I watched as she rushed off, eager to put a smile on children's faces. She was going to be a great mom one day. And hopefully one day very soon.

A handful of us were cleaning out an old caravan that I used to travel in. Some Alphas were hauling out the big stuff, while Meadow, Karis, and two other omegas searched for things that would be useful to the women and children.

I had been using the vehicle as a storage unit since gas was so pricey these days, but with Echo and a handful of other clan members heading out in search of the dark travelers, they needed at least three caravans. Usually, they'd go on foot for these missions,

but no one knew what this winter held as far as snowstorms and other inclement weather. The caravans would get them halfway across the country, and then when they reached as far east as possible, they would hike the rest of the way.

Had I not had a big commitment myself, I might've been one of the Alphas who volunteered to go with Echo. But Meadow was my priority right now. I had no intentions of leaving her. This first winter together, I wanted her right by my side or in the nest where I knew she would be safe.

Beside me, Echo tossed some old, rusty tools into a trolley. "You're worse than a packrat, man. How do you hoard all this loot without selling it? You'd be richer than all of us if you did."

I nudged him in the gut. "Don't worry about me, man. You just bring my caravan back. You and I will have big problems if you return without it."

Echo nodded. "Thanks, brother."

I clapped him on the back. "Anytime."

He leaned against the caravan. "By the way, I need to apologize to you in advance."

"Oh, no, you don't..." I said indifferently, hoping he hadn't done something I wouldn't like.

"First, I found something that was lost to you a long time ago, but I never told you about it. But with a good reason not to."

I blinked and waited, then asked, "What exactly did you find?"

"Perhaps tomorrow you will understand." He sighed. "And as for the last thing...when I'm gone, leadership will change. You know how it goes."

I shrugged. "I'm sure Axil will be relieved. Some of these Alphas can be real assholes to round up."

"I'll be leaving you as AIC, Alpha-in-Charge," he said.

"What?" I was shocked. I never thought I'd get the chance to earn such a role in my lifetime.

"You okay with that?"

"Of course. Why would I say no? But why leave me in charge?"

"We are Alphas, X. All must know how to follow. And all must know how to lead."

I'd heard the saying before from one of the oldest living Alphas in Mistacre and Northgarde.

"Why do you trust us with power, Echo? You could easily lead without being here. No one would defy your laws or try to

challenge you. You are a Primeblood."

"I lose nothing by giving another Alpha power," he said. "Besides, this is the final mission, and I swear that after it, I'll settle down."

"Sounds like you know you'll succeed."

He frowned. "This time I will."

"Do you think the dark travelers have stopped believing that we are broken? They tried to fix us before when we never solicited their help, but it didn't work. Do you think stopping *him* will end it?" I asked.

"Nothing ends."

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Three days later...

Meadow

After washing up the last of the dishes, I joined Xenon in the living room. He sat in the recliner and fumbled with an old, hand-crank radio. As soon as I walked in, he put the tool and the radio on the table.

"Ready for bed, omega?" he asked, letting his gaze trail up and down the length of me.

"If you're going to join me, I am."

As I walked between him and the coffee table, he gripped my hips with his big hands and placed a gentle kiss on my exposed belly. I let my silky kimono robe slide from my shoulders and fall in a heap at my feet. With nothing between us, I straddled his lap.

As he lapped at my nipples, I reached down and pulled his cock out of his shorts. His mouth was all over me as I stroked his cock. My breasts were slightly bruised from the intensity of his kisses. Yet, I begged for more, offering him both nipples to worship.

He thrusted two fingers up into my heated core, and I rocked my clit against his palm. As he finger-fucked me, he lapped at both breasts greedily.

Just as we were about to move to the next level, someone knocked loudly at the door.

I jumped, and he growled.

"Fuck it. I won't answer. Whoever it is can wait while we finish fucking," he said.

"You're AIC now. Maybe they need to tell you something important."

"*This* is important." He kissed me again.

The person knocked again, adamantly.

He groaned. "I don't know who this is, but it better be good." He grabbed his overcoat and helped me slip it on. Once he was sure that none of my body was exposed, he called out for the person to

come inside.

The door swung open and a big, massive Alpha stepped over the threshold. He raised his head to reveal blue-grayish colored eyes. The guy was rugged and smelled earthy as if he had just got through stomping in the mud. A fresh sheen of sweat—or maybe it was melted snow—covered his exposed midsection and core. He had dozens of scars, making it look as if he had fought with vicious dogs in the past. I looked down at his feet. As I anticipated, his boots were muddy. Yet, I just couldn't shake the feeling that this guy looked oddly familiar. I glanced between Xenon and the other Alpha.

Eyes wide with disbelief, Xenon sprang up. "Brother."

It was Xenon's older brother, Zultan. The brother who was exiled and never returned. The brother he'd been searching for for years.

Zultan dropped his bags. "Hello, little brother. I suppose Echo told you that I would return."

"He...might have. Not exactly."

They greeted each other with an arm shake and a quick, brotherly hug.

Xenon stepped back. "Z, I could kill you right now. *Where have you been?*"

"It's a long story. I won't bore you with it just yet. Why don't we start with yours? I heard you found your destiny." Zultan's attention shifted to me. "An omega, I see. Nicely done, X."

Xenon's eyes filled with happiness as he gave me a quick once over. "I have. This is Meadow, and she is my destiny. And I love her." He pointed at his brother. "Now, I really am going to kill you, brother. You'll wish you had never returned. How dare you…you are dead to me."

Even as Xenon spoke those words to his brother, I knew he didn't mean them. Just as I could detect when my Alpha needed love and affection, I also detected when he was mad, sad, or mournful. And for a very long time, he regretted letting his brother go. Now they were together. I found myself grinning from ear to ear, glad that Xenon's one wish was now fulfilled. Plus, my emotions matched that of my mate's. As if someone was cutting onions close by, my eyes watered…

Zultan hugged his brother again and said, "I love you too, X. I love you, too."

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BROKEN

The Uncaged 3

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Book Summary

Broken

"His name is Echo Primeblood.
He's the Alpha of Alphas. Ruler of his clan.
After years of seeking revenge, he's finally found it—and he's found me.
But I can't figure out if he wants to ravage me or destroy me. Or both."

Broken is Echo's and Patience's romance arc. Each book of the series should be read in order to complete the main story arc.

The Uncaged m/f omegaverse takes place on a dystopian Earth and combines paranormal and fantasy elements. There's plenty of romance, steam, and Alpha Omega bonding. The story contains some triggers such as descriptive violence and sex and offensive language, but never any cheating or ow/om drama.

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Preface

"We are all broken; that's how the light gets in." — Ernest Hemingway

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Chapter One

Four years ago...

Echo

I'd been tracking a problematic boar for weeks. Our farmers had fussed enough about the boar trampling their crops, yet they couldn't trap the animal, claiming it was too unpredictable and wild.

My hunting paid off; I found it roaming around just outside of Mistacre within a strip of territory we called no man's land. No man ventured there unless their sole intent was to get lost.

Oblivious to my presence, the beast scratched the ground and sniffed around the bushes. It was the longest I'd tracked any single thing in my life. Well, that wasn't exactly true. There was a difference between tracking an animal and a man. Or was there?

I looked down the straight line of the arrow, training my eyes on the target. I watched it for a while as it gnawed on some vegetation near the trunk of a tree. The boar didn't know I had my weapon aimed right at it, contemplating ending its life.

My reward was obvious. Food for days. Maybe even a week. All I had to do was let the arrow fly. I knew why I hesitated. The thrill of the hunt was more exciting than the actual kill itself.

My fingers became slack on the bowstring...

A mild autumn chill hung in the air. Overhead, the dark gray clouds lingered over the earth. Not one drop had fallen all morning, so I knew we were in for it tonight.

A rough gush of wind rolled through, and the boar got distracted and trotted off. No longer interested in killing the animal, I watched it leave.

After slipping the arrow back in the quiver and strapping the bow to my chest, I grabbed the turkey I took down before stumbling across the boar and then headed back to Mistacre.

I stopped just short of the first village to rinse the fresh game off in the lake. I didn't expect to find anyone near the water's edge, but

just to the right of a small hill, a woman leaned down over a thicket of flowering weeds.

I scented her immediately. The aura brought me to a full stop and a feeling of nausea and déjà vu took over me. *Berries.* The woman smelled of the sweetest mix of berries.

Her hair was long, sweeping past her shoulders and down her back. The shade, a darkish-blonde. From my position, I made out her silhouette. Her features were beautiful and her olive-complexioned skin was flawless. I'd never seen her before. I'd never seen *anyone* like her before.

A sharp carnal need surged through me and my groin tightened. My instincts kicked in like never before. In only one case would I have been so compelled to act on these feral instincts.

She was an omega.

I was so overcome with her beauty and this revelation that my increasing urges to be near her wouldn't stop.

Not even five feet away from me, an omega perched within my grasp. Not just any omega. An omega who threatened to send me into an instant rut by her mere presence. And I didn't even know her.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't focus on anything but the woman. Even the noise from the village which wasn't too far off seemed distant. I could've turned around and pretended not to see her, but I didn't want to draw my attention away from her.

Her scent and her omega nature weren't the only thing I detected about her. She was distraught and I thought I heard sniffles. After staring a little while longer, I witnessed as a fresh set of tears spilled down her cheeks and onto the weeds.

I took one step and the sole of my boot collapsed on a dry stick, snapping it in two.

The woman's gaze cut in my direction as she gasped.

Hypnotic green eyes brimming with tears stared back at me. In the palm of her hands, she had crushed some of the weeds. After closer inspection, I realized what she'd dug up wasn't a weed at all. It was a poisonous plant.

She dropped all of it on the ground, brushing dirt off her dress as she stood. Not only was she a beauty, but her body was exceptional. The thin, long, and gray drab dress she wore left most everything to the imagination, but I saw right through it. She was just as exquisite as she smelled.

"Don't tell anyone I was here. Please," she spoke in a soft voice.

She looked so young, yet so mature.

I looked down at the crumbled weeds at her feet and then back up at her. "The plant is poisonous," I said.

Her green eyes shifted away from me. *She knew.*

"Who will you kill?" I demanded.

She turned around.

"Stop!"

Her body physically tensed right before me when my voice echoed and boomed at her. I wasn't trying to frighten her, but I had done just that.

Her obedience sent a powerful surge straight to my dick. Every nerve ending in my body tightening, tempting me to snatch her—whoever she was. But I wasn't that greedy. Not today. I had learned to forgo basic needs long ago.

I moved closer. My eyes roamed the entire length of her, all while learning her unique scent—the scent of an omega going into heat. She wasn't one of *our* omegas. And she certainly wasn't claimed or mated. Not smelling like that, like a piece of heaven. No other Alpha's mark lay upon her. Another man's scent did not mask her, and she looked untouched. She was free for the taking.

My dick hardened and my fist tightened around the neck of the dead turkey. Her gaze had fallen to it and she looked quite disturbed.

"You are from that traveling group," I said. "You're here with Kolev, aren't you?"

She nodded.

The travellers had been in Mistacre for months. Even weeks after they couldn't help my mother shake her fever, they stayed. My mother was gone now, yet this group still lingered behind—a reminder of their grave failure. Kolev could not deliver what he promised, and yet he benefited from our continued hospitality. My brother allowed it. It was his fault they were still here to throw salt into an open wound. I wanted them to leave at once.

"Why haven't I seen you before?" I asked her.

She looked up at me and blinked. "I—I don't know. Please, just don't tell anyone you saw me, okay? I'm not supposed to be out."

My gaze narrowed in suspicion. "You're one of Kolev's woman slaves, then? He keeps you hidden from us. I'm sure you know why, *omega*."

She reddened. Her sweet scent flared up. She was innocent. And young. Kolev had no business with an omega in his possession. I wasn't sure where he acquired her, but it wasn't from us. This was even more proof that Kolev couldn't be trusted.

I looked at the ground where she dropped the poisonous buds. "Once again...who will you poison?"

Her chest moved up and down rapidly as she panicked. A flush of rogue red set in on her cheeks.

"Answer me!" I tried to keep my voice low, but my attempts only amplified my vocals.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I can't."

I tossed the dead turkey to the side. "You can. Who will you kill?" I demanded.

"N-nobody," she stammered.

"People don't just pick poisonous weeds from the ground for no reason at all. One more time, omega. Who do you want dead?"

"*Me*. The poison is for me."

Breath lodged in my throat and I grimaced. "Don't come to this place again, omega. Do you hear me? I command you to leave. And I command you to live. Whatever it is you're going through, it's not worse than death."

Her lips tightened and her eyes filled with fresh tears and bitterness. "You know nothing! You don't know a damn thing about me."

She spun on her heels and ran off like the wind through the trees.

I watched her leave. But my interest in the young omega never subsided.

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Chapter Two

Echo

"Evander, you're here." My brother, Czar, burst inside of our bungalow and kicked off his boots. "And you caught dinner."

Leave it to Czar to call me by my birth name, even though he was the person who dubbed me Echo a long time ago. The nickname stuck, especially when the other Alphas started using it.

But I wasn't a little runt of a boy anymore who followed his big brother around like a lost puppy. I presented as an Alpha seven years ago when I was fourteen. I enjoyed being in my brother's shadow when I was little, but that wasn't something I would admit now.

Back then, everywhere Czar went, so did I. If he called, I came. And if we ever got lost in the forest, we knew how to find each other by using our vocals. We knew how to find home.

I was good at projecting my voice, which changed from hoarse to a deep baritone no less than the day after I presented. I had vocals that commanded attention, but attention wasn't what I wanted.

Thank the fates I had a big brother. When my father got himself killed, it was Czar who stepped up and took over our community and saw that we didn't lose the land we worked so hard to get. To me, Czar's leadership over the lands of Mistacre and Northgarde made sense. After all, my father would've chosen him over me, anyway.

I tapped the pot of turkey stew sitting in the center of the table. "We gotta eat somehow, brother. No one's here to cook for us anymore. Help yourself."

"That's what you tell yourself, Evander. We can get any woman to cook for us. Any woman we desire. Just give them a wild night and wake up to a full-course the next day. Or if she's an omega, give her your knot, and she will never want you to leave."

"And there lies the problem..."

Czar rolled his eyes. "Yes, I know, Evander. Leaving is your

specialty." He grabbed the soup ladle.

I had wolfed down two bowl fulls already, so I followed it with a mug of beer as I watched Czar scoop the rest into his bowl.

Overeating hadn't fixed what was bothering me. After two cold showers, the omega was still on my mind.

"I thought you were hunting the boar this time," Czar said with mouthfuls of stew.

"I was."

"Then what happened? Couldn't find him. You getting rusty?" He snorted.

"If that's what you think."

He shook his head and grinned. "What would father say?" he teased.

"Nothing I'd want to hear, probably." I got up and poured another mug full of beer. "Did you find out where all that trash in the river was coming from?"

We had an increase in the amount of litter flooding our main channel and water source. Czar had taken off a few days ago from the usual village duties to see what was going on.

"Sure did. I thought one of the smaller villages upstream had been taken or vandalized. Come to find out, Anchora has been dumping their fucking trash, intentionally clogging up our dams. I've got something for that. What goes around, comes around," he said.

"Better be careful, Czar. It's not a game. Not when we have our people to think about."

"I know. It's just that they should know how it feels to have to scoop out and sort through all the trash."

I drummed my fingers lightly on the table. "Those travellers are still here on our land. What are you going to do about that? Don't you think they've overstayed their welcome? They couldn't help mother—"

Czar cut me off by pushing his chair back from the table and going to throw the scraps in the trash. He didn't like hearing that bringing the travellers in to help mother with her illness hadn't saved her. It was his idea, after all. He had agreed to it and solidified the deal with that group.

"This isn't about mother anymore," he said.

"What's it about, then? Ever since they came, they've done nothing but instigate fights among us. They are bad news and I

doubt it has anything to do with the demons Kolev worships. They're just an uncivilized bunch and they've been uncivilized for quite a long time. Plus, they are keeping secrets. Kolev wasn't truthful with us. If he is half the doctor he says he is, he could've told us that mother had less than a fifty percent chance of living before he deposited himself within our village."

"I understand you're still mad about mother, but there's a reason I let them stay. I see no harm in it. They've done nothing wrong to us. And Kolev can acquire from sectors what we cannot—easily and, most times, at a moment's notice. They weren't able to save mother from the fever, but they saved others. Let's not forget that they have two fully trained nurses in their ranks who have trained two of ours. With slayers hunting us down and sector guards shooting at us with heavy artillery, we're going to need the medical training. Trust me. And the training is happening now, brother. The have not stayed for free."

"Of course we need medicine. But how long is it going to take? This trade-off comes at an additional price. Aside from the fever that lasted only few months, we were doing fine without them."

"Just trust me, brother," he urged. "I have plans. Speaking of trade-offs, I think it's time that we see to our real duty as Primebloods."

I folded my arms across my chest. "And what is that?"

"We must breed. Both you and I. It's our purpose."

"You are our leader. I'm not. You can worry about knocking up an omega. I don't have to," I told him.

Czar chuckled. "That's what this is all about? Really? You didn't challenge me at all for leadership when father died because you don't want to knock up an omega?"

"I didn't challenge you because I didn't want it," I replied.

"Doesn't matter. Regardless of whether you choose to lead anything, you still have a duty as a Primeblood. Father would be—"

"Fuck father. He is dead."

Czar rolled his eyes. "You know, you can at least pretend that you have a little respect."

"Respect must be earned."

"You are just like him. More than you know. Too proud and shit. Stubborn. Rude. An asshat of an Alpha."

"I am nothing like him," I rasped between clenched teeth.

"As I recall him telling us, father never wanted to be tied down

to an omega either. He *finally* settled with our mother because of his duties."

"He *bought* mother," I corrected.

"Does it matter whether he bought her or hunted her or just plain took her? He was an Alpha. She was an omega. And they accepted each other. And they grew to love each other. He loved her until the day sector hunters tracked him down and killed him in his vulnerability. I think it's time you and I ensured our birthright, brother. Either that, or we must see to it that we choose the right successor."

"You first," I grunted.

"Of course. Always me first. Then you second." Czar shook his head. "It'll happen sooner than you think."

"What?"

"I saw a girl. An omega. I saw her today for the first time on my way back into the village. It's so odd that I had never seen her before. I think she might belong to Kolev personally. I can smell him on her. She must be a slave. And she's taken that travellers' mark."

I turned around, giving my brother my full attention. "What's this girl look like?"

"She's pretty as fuck. Blond hair. Her eyes were green, almost unnaturally green. She was small. Short. Thin, as if she only eats one bloody meal a day. I could probably break her, but I could tell she had some fight in her."

"I...I..." I stammered, realizing the woman Czar described was the woman I had seen out by the lake pondering whether to consume a poisonous plant. And it was the same woman who caused me to seek relief over and over again in a chilly shower. Masturbation had not satisfied my thirst for her.

"She is too young now. Her scent tells me this. She rushed past me as if she was afraid, but she will be ready soon. I want her, brother. I want her for myself. They are not related. Can't be. Even if he is her male guardian, he will release her from servitude. I will make him do it. No common man should possess an omega. I will pay whatever price."

"And if he doesn't release her. If he refuses...?"

Czar caught my gaze and held it. "Then we will make another enemy. And then, he will have no choice but to leave...without that omega."

I spun around and looked out of the small window above the kitchen sink. My brother and I wanted the same woman. My heart beat so rapidly within my chest I thought my ribcage might burst. I gripped the countertop tightly in my fist.

Czar wasn't just some no-named Alpha seeking to lay claim to a woman whose scent I remembered so vividly that I could almost taste her. Czar was my brother. If I challenged him now...if I challenged in this, I'd be no better than the dozens of Alphas who maliciously and blindly fought for the scraps every day within our tight-knit community. I refused to be part of a growing problem. The outcome wasn't worth it.

"What do you think, brother? Isn't it time we both took an omega? I'll take one first. Then you, second. Is that a plan?"

"You will take her, anyway. So, why are you asking me?"

I took my exit, leaving my brother in the kitchen to ponder.

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Chapter Three

Present-day (Four years later)...

Patience

"Crap!"

I looked to the left and right of my room, wondering why it was so hard for people not to touch my stuff without asking me first. I didn't mind sharing, but this was beyond disrespectful. It was as if someone had deliberately come into my room, rummaged through my belongings, and stolen my last pair of steel sheers. They could've stolen any other thing, but they chose the single most important thing I used in my line of work to earn my own money.

I had until tomorrow morning to put the finishing touches on a dress I made for a girl for her sixteenth birthday celebration, and I just didn't want to screw this up.

I huffed, pulled the room door shut behind me, and ran down the corridor to the sitting room. It was once a hotel lobby way before the bombs dropped, but now it had a different purpose. My group had taken up residence at the hotel for the past couple of months. Supposedly, the landowner granted permission. We would probably be here through the rest of the winter, maybe longer.

When we found the motel, dust and cobwebs covered most of the hotel surfaces. We cleaned the place up, got water running to it, and dragged our belongings inside. We made use of the leftover furniture, completely restoring and repurposing bits and pieces.

I liked the place, probably because I was given my own room. I didn't have to share with two other women like before when we stayed on an old college campus. I had my own space here and time to myself to be as creative as I wanted to be. The downside was that I didn't care for gossip anymore, so I didn't know what our leader's —aka, my estranged husband's—plans were for us next. As a member of the traveller community, one thing I had come to learn was that our next move was unpredictable. The plus side was that I could earn money making clothes. We didn't have as many

seamstresses and dressmakers anymore. They'd all gone away, separated from the group for one reason or another.

When I reached the sitting room, it didn't surprise me to find three of Kolev's other wives huddled in comfy chairs under big thick quilts. Quilts I had made for them. A small blaze danced and crackled in the fireplace. A bottle of homemade wine sat on the table as they sipped from their glasses. A pile of old dusty magazines lay atop the table.

Jasmina was flipping through the pages of a book. "Patience. You care to join us?" she asked.

Jasmina was Kolev's third wife, but she'd been married to him the longest of all of us. His first two wives were gone. He cast wife number one out after she challenged his rules, and the other went missing—although there was a rumor that Kolev told her to leave after he discovered her infidelities.

In the group, there were life-long travellers whose families traveled with the core group even before Kolev took up leadership. With Kolev as their leader, they benefited from his experience as a life-long politician who knew the ins and outs of interacting with various sector and community leaders. And then there were followers who might have not yet adopted the traveller lifestyle in total, but contributed talents and other skills to the group. Anything ranging from woodworking to farming from hunting to medical needs.

As for Kolev's wives, he kept us as charms. We were his wives in name only. Our duties were simple. Aside from being his *beauties* to flaunt around, we all had responsibilities just like the rest of the members in our group. I was here because I was sold to him. I stayed because he promised my safety. All I had to do was follow his rules. Getting on his bad side brought out the worst in him. And here I was, alive, even though my aunt told me I'd be dead before my twenty-first birthday. Yet, no one cared to warn me that thieves were aplenty.

I placed my hands on my hips, looking at the other wives. "Who stole my steel shears?"

"Not me," Raven replied, running her fingers through her perfect brown coils. "Why would we take your shears? We aren't allowed weapons, you know."

"Shears, which are scissors, aren't weapons," I said.

"Can be," she retorted. "You can literally cut off a man's cock

with those things." She laughed at her own joke. "Just kidding. Lighten up, Patience." She slid the wine bottle across the table toward me. "Here. Take some. No one's going to tell Kolev on you."

Kolev had gone with a few of his liaisons to make deals with the leader of a small state in Southern Utopia. He had visited with several leaders of Utopia a few times already. I had no idea what he had up his sleeve this time, but he always had a way of tricking vulnerable people into doing what he wanted by offering something they never refused. These days, currencies involved more than just coins. Anything of value that could be exchanged between a buyer and seller was fair game. And any and everything was traded. Including humans.

While Kolev was gone, his wives, myself included, strayed from the strict day-to-day routines of being married to a demanding, narcissistic leader. I was happy for once that I had some free rein on the property without fear of being reprimanded for doing something wrong. Just yesterday, I snuck off to visit a deserted town nearby. And I found gold. Not literally. New fabrics and needles to work with were worth more than gold to me. At one point, Kolev brought in fabrics by the box so I'd always have something to work with. Aside from what I found, it'd been months since I last got my hands on a new design.

"Well, you going to join us or not," Raven asked, tearing pages from a magazine and tossing them inside the fireplace.

"No. I have work to do, and I need shears pronto," I told her.

Raven rolled her eyes. "Just use your teeth."

"We didn't take your shears this time," Jasmina said.

"Melanie probably did it. She took off with some scavengers and she had a big sack of things. I saw her this morning sneaking around your room while you were gone. Maybe she took your stuff," Celestia chimed in as she laid back on the receptionist's desk.

Celestia was the quiet one, but she usually spread most of the rumors, including ones that got us in trouble.

"What do you mean she left?" I asked.

"She took off. Hauled ass. And if she left with scavengers, I'd bet my ass that she's not coming back. Kolev would mark her unclean and have her head for straying on him."

"So, she just stole my only pair of shears?"

"Probably to trade. It is steel. Or maybe to use as a weapon...like I said. She always complained that Kolev hardly ever gave her any

coins. Maybe she'll kill him. Put us all out of our misery, you know," Raven offered.

"Be careful what you say, Raven," Jasmina warned.

Raven shrugged. "Just saying what we're all thinking. Patience is Kolev's favorite. All she has to do is ask and he'd get whatever she wants. All you'd have to do is bat your eyelashes, show submissiveness and say please. As for the rest of us, we're always reminded of how lazy we are."

"Not true. I'm not his favorite," I said.

"He has a different fav or the week every week," Raven said. "And if we do work, he scolds us. If we don't work, he scolds us. I'm enjoying this free time while he's away. I'm sure he'll be taking one of us to flaunt with those uppity state leaders he's been talking about. I wonder who will it be..." She cut her eyes at me.

"After he learns *Pretty Patience* went off the property without protection, we won't even be on his raider. He'll be too busy reprimanding her," Celestia offered.

That sneaky bitch had spied on me.

Jasmina perked up. "What? You went off the property?"

I exhaled heavily.

Celestia smiled. "Don't worry. I won't tell."

"None of us will," Raven chimed in. "Anyway, if you want, you can use my scissors. Not as good and sharp as yours, but I'll get it to you tonight if you promise to give it back once you're done."

I nodded. "I appreciate it."

"How nice of you, Raven. See, we can all get along now, can't we?" Celestia crooned, then shifted her attention back to me. "By the way, Patience, can you make me a new vest? I can even pay upfront. No more IOUs. Wyatt found a new dealer, and I have something in my possession that will take away those awful cramps you get every other week. So, let's trade." She winked.

My face and neck grew hot when she mentioned my ailment out loud.

"Thanks, but no thanks," I said, and then spun around swiftly.

"Suit yourself, Patience, but don't pretend the pain isn't unbearable."

Celestia and I had something in common. Yet, she was actually doing something about her condition. She and I were omegas. We were probably the only women of that status in the group. And she was right. Every time I went into heat, the pain was unbearable.

Ignoring her, I walked back to my room.

Another of Kolev's wives was gone. I should've been taking notes. I should've left a long time ago.

To Kolev, this was just a minor setback. He'd find another wife to replace her.

But to me, this spoke volumes about the state of things. Kolev no longer had the type of power over his followers that he had years ago. Those that remained either did so out of undying loyalty to him or because the alternative—alone in the savage world—was too harsh to swallow.

When I got back to my room, I shoved a dresser in front of the door so no one could burst inside. I checked the hiding place where I kept all the coins I had accumulated throughout the years. Everything was still there. And I had enough. I had enough to buy food, water, and transportation into, and possibly citizenship of almost any sector I wanted. I had enough to support myself for quite a long time. I called it my emergency fund because when shit hit the fan again, I would be ready.

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Chapter Four

Patience

I calculated I had a little over four hours to search for what I wanted and then get back into the deserted town before Kolev returned. Like last time, I was limited to what I could stuff into my tote. I didn't want to overdo and risk getting caught.

The coast was clear, and I almost wondered if anyone knew anything about the place. The cobwebs and unstable structure would've warded anyone off. Even recently shed snakeskin should've sent me running back to the safety of my hotel room.

My heart thudded wildly as I rummaged carefully through the mess, poking at it with a hacksaw I found buried under some old plastic pipes. The saw wasn't the best weapon of defense against snakes or spiders, but it was all I had. After all, nothing had attacked me so far. All I wanted was the fabrics and old clothes, and this abandoned shop was just the place to find it. Whatever I found today would keep me occupied for months.

The sound of crushing glass outside made my heart stop. I froze and looked up from my searching. Expecting one of Kolev's guardsmen to barge into the old shop, I slipped behind the counter and stayed there until there was silence. After a while of nothing, I crept out and peeked through a crack in the dusty window. Low-hanging, mossy branches blocked my view, but I spotted the thing —or rather the animal—that made the noise.

A black cat.

I sighed in relief. The cat turned in my general direction, meowed, tiptoed across a pile of old antique glass vases, and then scurried away. When I pushed off from the window, I nicked the heel of my hand on a piece of broken glass sticking through the shutter. I winced and wiped the blood away with the underside of my dress.

I opened up my duffle bag and stuffed a stack of sewing patterns inside. After picking out some things from behind the counter that I knew would make great gifts, I grabbed up the hacksaw and left the

shop.

After making sure the coast was clear of any other warm-blooded animals, I made my way over to a creek bed.

I was lucky my previous visitor was just a cat and nothing else. If I were superstitious, I might have been nervous. Seeing a black cat meant bad luck, or worse, a sign of pending death. Or did it? Jasmina, who openly claimed to practice Wiccan before being sold and married to Kolev, said black cats brought good luck.

I hummed as I washed the dust and dirt from my hands, making sure no shards of glass or other debris remained in the cut on my palm. I attempted to get the cobwebs out of my hair since I wouldn't have time to wash it before heading back. I couldn't be certain that anyone would see me returning to camp looking disheveled, but there always seemed to be that one tattle-tale who aimed to stir up trouble among members of the group just so he could see them get punished. At this point, I was numb to punishment. Kolev's favorite type's of punishment were public humiliation or imprisonment.

If anyone saw me sneaking around outside of the camp without guard protection, they'd throw me under the bus. Kolev had a way of dealing with people who defied him. I was supposed to be setting an example for all the other young women on how to be a dutiful and obedient servant to my husband by staying in the house and doing dozens of wifely duties repeatedly. I wasn't supposed to stray. But sometimes the reward was worth way more than the risk.

Or was it? I was risking a lot being out here by myself, but no one else would understand my urge to rummage through the junk for lost treasures.

"Never stray, and you'll never be lost or sold again."

I shook my head to rid myself of ancient memories. Sold into Kolev's group when I was fifteen, I was told I had just one purpose —to serve. Being chosen as one of his wives when I turned seventeen took me by surprise. I was given the option to accept a place in his group or be sold off by my aunt to a trafficker.

Now, at twenty-one, I still feared being sold. Sold...or lost.

Up ahead, I spotted a tree that I marked with white paint the first time I came out. I probably could've found my way back without the proverbial bread crumbs, but the marked trees were my backup just in case I lost my path.

I had to get back. I didn't want anyone getting into trouble on

my account. Kolev would be back soon, and everyone would be on their P's and q's. Everything would be back to normal. In a sense, Kolev was the boss, and he ran the group like a small corporation. The only difference between him and some of the lowlife politicians in some sectors we visited was that he had no home base. Other leaders stayed put, reigning over a sole domain. Kolev, on the other hand, dictated everything.

Just as I focused all of my attention on getting back to my room, some bushes rustled to the left of me. I didn't stop. I just kept going. The worse thing for me to do when I thought an animal was onto me was to keep moving and not make any sudden moves. Other than the occasional snake and the black cat, I doubted anything worth panicking roamed around here.

As I made my way closer to my shelter, something just didn't seem right. Hairs rose on the back of my neck and I felt this strong inclination to look behind me. This time, I fed my curiosity, swirling around to see if anyone was there. Of course, there was nothing.

I adjusted the strap of my bag on my right shoulder and gripped the saw handle tight in my left fist. Maybe the cat had followed me, yet I couldn't be certain. There was no way I was going to swing on a harmless cat because of some untested myth.

One minute my feet were planted on the ground and then in the next, they weren't.

Something big grabbed me from behind, dragging me off course. Large male hands clasped over my mouth. Air squeezed out from my lungs as the man fixed me to his rock-solid chest, holding me so I wouldn't get away. My efforts to scream were cut off by the absence of breathing air.

So much for swinging the damn saw. I must have dropped it somewhere. I scratched and clutched at the man's skin, trying to pry his arms away from me.

As my surroundings grew unfamiliar, I panicked. I felt like my lungs were going to collapse and I would die, but the man didn't allow any sound to escape my mouth. I struggled and kicked against him, using what little energy I had.

The man smelled of something unique. The aura reminded me of mint. But this was a different aroma—nothing that any plant could produce—and I had come across it before.

As if him holding me tightly like a large sack of potatoes wasn't

bad enough, he used the weight of his chest to secure me against the trunk of a tree.

When he lifted his hand from my mouth, I screamed, only to realize that my screams echoed right back at me. Looking around, I realized we were within the center of a gorge. Rocks as high as some mountains formed deep canyons, and I couldn't see anything beyond the cliff. This man had brought me to just the right place. No one would hear my screams.

The man caught my hair in his hand and wound it around his wrist like a rope, then he sniffed me, raking his nose up and down the column of my neck.

"What are you doing to me?" I demanded.

"Omega," he rasped against my skin, sending goosebumps all along my flesh.

I gasped. "No," I mumbled. I could lie to almost anyone who didn't know any better about my status. Almost anyone...except...

An Alpha.

Something solid and thick swelled along the column of my lower back. My knees grew weak, nearly buckling out from under me. I wanted to kneel to the ground and beg for something more than his mercy.

"What do you want?" I cried out.

"I want you to stop distracting me," he bit out. "I could smell you from across the hills, omega. Hungry for berries that I knew couldn't be growing this time of year, imagine my surprise when I find you."

"I was just leaving. Please let me go."

"What is your name?" he demanded.

He pressed his hard length into my back, and my needy sex clenched. Warmth coated my panties and I could've died from the embarrassment.

"Your name!"

I trembled. "Patience."

"No, omega, I do not have patience." He wrapped his fingers around my waist, pressing his body firmly to mine. He was firm with his grip, but nothing about it was painful. If anything, I felt warmth and oddly...security. "Tell me your name now, omega."

"Patience!"

"You are playing games—"

"*My name is Patience,*" I said, slower this time.

"Patience," he growled. The intensity of his deep voice vibrated through me, weakening me at the knees. "I could fuck you right here, right now, omega, and then leave you just as you are."

"Please don't. I'll be deemed unclean," I begged.

"Unclean?" he growled. "There's nothing unclean about the sweet slick running down between your legs. You're ready for an Alpha's knot, Patience."

Heat slammed into me, igniting my core.

"Y-you're an Alpha," I said, softly.

He spun me around with my hair still wrapped around his wrist. When I saw him, I was floored by his presence, his rakishly good looks, and a feeling of déjà vu. I knew this man. I'd seen this Alpha before. I knew his scent.

I'd never forgotten his rich blue eyes, eyes so blue they reminded me of glaciers. His hair was the color of midnight—a blue-ish black. He wore his shoulder-length mane in unruly waves—wild and free. Standing a good seven feet tall, maybe more, he towered over me. I had to lift my chin high to observe him. Aside from baggy slacks, an opened-vest that left nothing to the imagination, and a fur overcoat hung across his shoulders, he carried a bow and quiver on his right shoulder. I'd never seen the type of weapon before. It was made of a different structure than any bow I'd ever seen before.

As the Alpha's eyes danced over my face, I realized he recognized me too. The last time I saw him, I didn't remember him being this commanding and enchanting. His name was on the tip of my tongue. My lips parted to speak...

"Say nothing." He cut me off and twisted me back around to face the gnarly tree once more.

"Why are you doing this? Why are you here?"

"You know why. Where is your leader?" He demanded.

"I-I don't know."

"That's a lie." His erection stiffened on my back.

I arched my spine, not understanding why my body was reacting so desperately to his arousal.

"He's away right now. He's been away for a few days. Please just let me go."

His lips left a fiery trail just below my jawline. "Why do you allow such a coward to possess you?"

I shook my head. "No one possesses me." I wished I believed it. "I know you. I know who you are...*what you are*..." My voice trembled

as I recalled a night of sheer terror and devastation. And fire. I'd never forgotten that night, just like I'd never forget the man who first sent me into an alpha-induced heat.

"You're Echo. Czar's brother," I whispered.

Suddenly, he grew stiff and backed away. Cold air replaced the warmth that once enveloped me. Unsure of what he'd do next, I turned around slowly.

His eyes burned into me with such menace and anger. *"You betrayed him."*

"What? No, I—"

"Leave," he commanded. "Leave, before I break you."

Confused and hurt, I slipped away. I ran with tears brimming my eyes. I didn't know how I was able to find my way back home. I didn't need the paint to guide me. My legs took me away from the Alpha. Away, where I no longer felt his presence near me. I knew he could track me back to this place, but somehow, I didn't care. Knowing what he was, he probably already knew where we lived. His accusation led me to believe that he was here because of what happened to his brother. I knew he was. After the fire, I was forced to flee with Kolev and his followers that night. The group scattered and many were lost, never to be seen or heard from again. Had Echo come to settle the score?

When I reached the courtyard, I bumped into someone. My eyes were cloudy and I couldn't see their face.

"Is something wrong?" the person asked.

"No, nothing. Sorry, it's nothing."

"Where did you come from?" another asked.

Without answering, I ran to my room and bolted myself inside.

I took off my dress, hopped into the shower, and washed the slick from my thighs. When my fingers brushed against my clit, I no longer thought about how unclean I believed I was. Instead, I let down my guard and allowed myself to feel for once. It took only seconds of thinking of the Alpha before a sharp orgasm took me over the edge, lingering like an echo.

My lust-filled needs overrode any threats I felt about the situation.

The Alphas were here.

And finally, after all these years, Echo and I had stumbled into each other again. He was older now, but he was still the same. Rugged. Rough. And with a temper as hard as steel.

Just like the last time, I ached for him. No one else but him.

Out of all the Alphas I'd come across, only Echo had managed to make me rethink my purpose in life.

Too bad he hated me. He hated me with a passion.

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Chapter Five

Echo

The next day, I was too impatient to wait until dawn to head out. I was anxious and ready to get on with this so that I could return to back to what I loved doing the most. Hunting.

Hunting required time away from my home. And time away from my home left my leadership position as Alpha of Alphas open to challenge from others. But not once since I accepted responsibility had I ever been challenged. There was a time when I once wished for it, but the Alphas in my corner were loyal. And the ones that weren't trustworthy left long before my family secured the land rights. So, by the time the responsibility came down to me, shifty Alphas weren't something I had to deal with.

Only me and a few other Alphas were up this early. Now that I knew where Kolev and his followers were staying, I had some more eavesdropping to do.

Four years had passed since he took his group and fled our lands, leaving only sorrow and much chaos behind. What was he like now? Had he no remorse for what he'd done? Did he continue tricking people into his self-serving agendas? I already knew the answer to that. Nothing could change his ways.

I wondered how he had amassed so many followers, but the rumor was that he recycled them all the time with only a few loyal ones staying behind, even after finding out that he was a fraud.

I almost couldn't believe my eyes the other day when I realized that the same omega my brother had pined over had stayed with Kolev and his traveling group. She even bore the mark of a traveller—a small circle inside of an inverted triangle. The marking was similar to that of one of his followers who were lower in rankings. Xenon's mate had been marked with a similar symbol—a large circle around a smaller inverted triangle. To me, the markings meant the same, yet it also told me that the omega was much closer to Kolev than I first believed. Her rank within his circle also confirmed my suspicions and the possible involvement in my

brother's death?

Didn't matter. Kolev was the last culprit standing. He was the only man alive that had directly caused my brother's demise. The rest of them—I caught up to them over the years. In their dying moments and even as I carved out their flesh, no one could tell me where Kolev was hiding. His followers were recycled, almost like clockwork. He wanted it that way, and that way, no one knew or anticipated his next move.

In the years after my brother's death, I would find dead bodies with travellers' markings left to rot in ditches and open fields. They were never buried or burned with care. Just disposed of and left for the vultures. Did he treat all of his people with such disrespect? Did he treat her—the omega—any different? To have kept her for so long, he must have trusted her. And if she stayed all these years, she must've been like him. Deceptive. But I couldn't see it. I saw something else in her eyes.

Although Kolev was cunning, he wasn't the master of deception. He was just a fake, running from the inevitable. I would kill him. I would toy with him and kill him, just as he did Czar.

"It looks as if you're going to pop a blood vessel, Echo," Ketil exclaimed, walking up behind me.

I had been so focused on planning revenge, I didn't realize I held the chain so tightly in my fists that my blood circulation seemed cut off at the wrist.

"I just might. But it's not my blood vessel I'm going to pop," I replied, inspecting an arrow before tucking it into my quiver.

"Looks like you're headed out. Hunting?" Ketil asked, throwing some logs into a wagon nearby.

"I'll be back before dark."

"You need company?"

"Not this time. You tell everyone to stay close to camp. Soon, Ketil. Soon, we'll be done here," I said.

"You've found out where they've been sleeping, haven't you?"

I nodded. "He's got to have a little over a hundred living there, about a quarter mile away from the canyons. Could be more. Not sure. We all know he uses them to pad his numbers, then gets rid of them. In either case, he isn't there. Probably out feeding bullshit to one of these gullible leaders down here. You know they're all hospitable in the south."

Ketil laughed. "Not to Alphas. We've got really bad table

manners. You know, we could make a quick mess of that place and have a nice surprise waiting for crazy Kolev when he gets back."

"We could, but not yet. Only one man is responsible for my brother's death. That's who I came for."

"You and me both, blood brother. I want revenge for Czar's death just as much as you," he said. "Revenge won't bring him back, but it will send a message and put a stop to Kolev. I don't think anyone will miss him. Actually, I'm confused about how he's been able to avoid his fate for so long."

Ketil was Czar's childhood best friend. The night Ketil left to trade furs was the same night Czar was murdered. Like Ketil, I'd been beating myself up for years, not because I didn't warn Czar about the treacherous Kolev, but because I wasn't there to help him fight to live another day.

"His group is not the only traveling group. It's easy for others to get them confused and point people in the wrong direction. I admit I was following the wrong leads, and he's actually bold enough to call himself King now, using aides to act on his behalf and hiding his next move from his own people even. He must've been avoiding all Alphas like the plague."

"He is the plague," Ketil said. "Why do they follow this rat anyway?"

"Easy. He offers them things, whether material or immaterial, they cannot refuse. Medicine, for one. He has been known to heal the sick. Food. Shelter. For those that can't go back to their home sectors for whatever reason, traveling with a caravan is probably the next best thing. Better than being alone. Better than being hungry and afraid."

Ketil crossed his arms over his chest. "Being thrown in a ditch after you're dead is not better than being alone when you're alive."

"Well, that's the thing. The dead don't speak. What do you think his real agenda is?" I asked, strapping my quiver to my back.

"Same as any other man. Power," Ketil replied.

"Except, he takes from others to gain it, no matter the cost."

Ketil nodded. "It's what he does. And he's living on borrowed time."

"Yet, power is too predictable of an agenda. He has something else up his sleeve."

"You're probably right."

"I hope I'm not." I picked up the rest of my stuff.

"I see you're eager to go. Happy hunting, brother." He clapped me roughly on my shoulder. "And this time, don't play with the food. Or let it get away. You might not be hungry, but we sure are."

I chuckled and walked away from our campsite.

I knew exactly where I was headed.

I had memorized the trails and learned the lay of the land. It was fitting of Kolev to settle deep in the middle of nowhere. Far enough from established sector boundaries to keep from being harassed or ran off, yet close enough to barter and trade. The land was dry. And the bite of winter around these parts prevented lush vegetation from growing.

Kolev wasn't the only one on my mind.

The omega had sparked something in me I rarely allowed to surface. But I allowed it...this urge to go straight into rut just so I could fuck, knot, and break the omega who betrayed my brother.

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Chapter Six

Patience

I shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, anticipating much anger and frustration from Kolev Zima over what happened while he was gone. All the wives were present, except for one—the one that recently got away. Melanie.

Kolev had us lined up before him while he sat in his favorite chair, scrutinizing us as if he were superior to everyone else in the room.

A rough-looking guy sat on the ground to the right of him with one arm propped on his knee while he gnawed on a thin stick. Scars riddled his face and arms, and he looked as if he'd been in a war to end all wars. The number of bruises spread across his flesh reminded me of the brutal nature of his job—slayer for hire.

To the left of Kolev, his aide sat in a smaller chair. He seemed uninterested in what was going on and kept looking off in the distance. Kolev had three aides in total, maybe four. I could never keep count. They went with him to various sector leaders and on almost every occasion, they acted as the face-to-face liaison while Kolev remained in the shadows, unwilling to show his face.

It was said that Kolev had lived in an era when things used to be normal. Before the bombs dropped. Before everything took a turn for the worse. He used to be a politician. A governor with his eye on the highest position in the White House.

After the withdrawal of all fifty states from the US and the fall of the government, his plan to rule his sector failed. He was betrayed—brutally betrayed. Tortured, emasculated, and beaten within an inch of his life, they left him with nothing. And then he made nothing out of something once again using his skills as a corrupt politician to earn himself a title among a group of travellers. He slithered up the ranks to become the leader—their King. It was said that Kolev and his followers were called dark travellers everywhere they went. Even when my aunt sold me to Kolev, she knew what he was and what he stood for.

Like everyone else in the group, I had no idea how old Kolev was. We had to guess, and most of us guessed he was much older than he revealed. Aside from a single lock of gray hair growing from his crown, nothing else but his old archaic ways tipped us off about his true age. He used spells and rituals to preserve his youth. He used these things to escape death. He used them to lure others to elude their fate as well. There was no doubt about it, as a licensed doctor, he had used his naturopathic methods to cure many ailments and save many lives. His expertise always came at a price.

Suddenly, Kolev stood up and walked from one wife to the other, looking us over.

Jasmina, his oldest wife, was at the far right of the line. I was at the far left. Melanie—recently departed—should've been to the left of me, but she had gotten away.

Raven, with her brown coils, shrank back when he touched her face.

Meredith, who made it known that she didn't like the rest of us by staying away unless she absolutely had to be present, neither advanced toward nor flinched from his touch. She seemed aloof and distant.

Celestia wore a troubled expression on her face.

When he got to me, I kept my gaze on the floor. I hoped he didn't notice the erratic beating of my heart. My insides were still twisting and turning, demanding something his medicines couldn't fix, but I didn't complain.

"I'm disappointed in all of you," he said in a low tone, and then raising his voice he yelled, "I cannot go anywhere and come back to good news about how obedient you all have been. You are my wives. My followers look up to you and how you behave and misbehave."

His dull gray eyes sparked with fury and he continued, "I ask very little of all of you. You have one primary task. Each of you. Jasmina, to clean. Raven, to transcribe. Meredith, to see to the sick. Celestia, to see to the orphaned children. Patience, to sew and hem. And Melanie—" He slammed his fist down on the surface of the table. "*Melanie* couldn't keep her legs closed and ran off with strange men. She'll get what she deserves. There will be no mistake about that. You were to work as a unit while I was gone, so how was it not noticed by any of you that Melanie planned to leave?"

He waited a bit as if he would allow us to reply, but then spoke

again. "Celestia!"

"Yes," Celestia squeaked.

"She was in the adjoining room right next to you. Did you not hear her or the strangers she smuggled in?"

"I—I know nothing about any strangers," Celestia replied.

"Strangers were among us. Just ask me how I know," he grunted.

No one said anything or asked anything.

"How she came to be friends with them is still a mystery. They are but scavengers. The scourge of this disease-riddled earth. It doesn't matter now. She's as good as gone. Things must tighten up here or else I won't be able to protect anyone." He tilted Celestia's chin upward with his fingertips, forcing her to look at him. "I won't be able to protect the most vulnerable from those who exist to hurt you. Do you understand what I'm talking about, Celestia?"

She nodded.

"Do you?" he demanded.

"Yes, I do," she blurted.

It was just like him to use his knowledge of her omega status to chastise her. He'd even done it to me.

"Good. As long as you stay within the circle I outline, no other man will ever be able to hurt you again. Of course, no one can steal the innocence that has already been taken, but I promised you'd never have to be used inappropriately while on your back again."

Celestia's face reddened. Everyone knew that a dangerous group of savage Alphas had taken and used her before Kolev stumbled upon her. She didn't like to talk about it, so no one ever mentioned it. No one except Kolev.

"So, you would tell me if anyone was planning on betraying me, wouldn't you, Celestia?"

She paused a beat and then nodded. "Yes."

"Are you certain, Celestia?"

"Um...yes." As she fidgeted about in front of Kolev, my pulse quickened. I knew how tempting it was for Celestia to spill all to Kolev just to get him off her back. Just over a year ago, we all agreed to mind our own business, and for months, there had been no instances of slip-ups. Truthfully, we all had dirt on each other. Dirt that could get us kicked out of the group or the subject of a worse punishment.

"Just remember, the punishment for aiding disloyal colleagues is harsh. Why don't you ask Jasmina? She'll tell you all about it."

Jasmina had been a wife to Kolev longer than any of us. Like all of us, she feared being thrown out and left alone, or back in the same awful place she fled from. Unbeknownst to Kolev, she had tried escaping once a while back with some traffickers, only to be told by them she had limited value and her skills were not in demand where they were going. To my knowledge, she never tried escaping again.

This world was cruel. Harsh. Only the strong survived. I hadn't met one single person yet who claimed to have been all alone.

"One primary task," he repeated. "Compared to others, your duties as wives are easy. You took an oath of loyalty. You took an oath of celibacy." He stopped in front of Meredith this time. "You swore to remain chaste and clean."

Unlike his other wives, Meredith was born within the gypsy lifestyle before Kolev took over the group. Her parents weren't lucky, and both succumbed to diseases while traveling. She came to Kolev on her own accord, offering herself to him.

"Meredith."

"Yes," she gasped.

"Step out of line."

She looked confused. "Wh-what?"

Kolev nudged her in the back and she stumbled forward. "You will reveal to myself and all who stand here how you have broken your oath to me."

"Please, Kolev..." She shook her head.

He wrapped his fingers around her throat, cutting off her pleas. "I don't want to hear it now. Remove your clothes. Show everyone the scars...the proof...go on." He yanked at her blouse and some buttons popped off and rolled across the floor.

She screamed and covered up her chest.

"Dahuagon, help her out," Kolev ordered.

The Alpha slayer got to his feet, produced a sharp pocket knife, and sliced Meredith's blouse and skirt until her clothes were hanging in rags about her.

My breaths stumbled in my throat. With each inhale and exhale, my lungs burned. Even though Meredith was never kind to any of us, the way Kolev treated her at that moment still bothered me.

What had she done?

I got my answer when Kolev pointed to the long horizontal scar stretching nearly five inches across her lower abdomen. I'd assisted

in enough vaginal and c-section childbirths to recognize the type of scaring each left behind.

"Just last month, she was fat as a pig and with child," Kolev uttered. "And now, she is not with child. The baby is gone. Where...you ask?"

"Please, Kolev, it was a mistake. One mistake. I fixed it. I—"

Kolev struck her so hard across the face, she fell back on the floor. She didn't get up. She covered her bloody lip and wailed. When Celestia tried to lend Meredith a hand, she swatted it away.

Kolev returned to his chair. "Melanie delivered this baby prematurely, yes? While I was gone, both of you conspired behind my back. She took the premature baby from your womb. She took the baby with her, didn't she?"

Meredith wailed and didn't respond. But it all made sense now. Melanie had medical training specifically as a midwife. Meredith hid her pregnancy and because she never congregated much with us, no one suspected a thing. Her baggy attire couldn't hide her condition from Kolev, who had probably known about her infidelity for a while.

"Maybe you even shared the same man with Melanie. But I won't get into that."

"We didn't," Meredith blurted out, sniffling.

"Then you know the father," Kolev stated.

Meredith said nothing.

"Doesn't matter. May they all Rest In Peace."

Meredith glanced up, horrified. "What did you do?"

Kolev grinned. "Name the father and I'll tell you exactly where you can find them. I'll let you join them permanently if that's what you like."

"Did you...please don't tell me you hurt them..." Meredith began sobbing.

"Take her out of here. Chain her to the bed. Make sure she doesn't leave." Kolev lifted a hand and waved her away. Dahuagon then got up and hauled her out.

"As for the rest of you, you may leave," Kolev stated. "I hope you all have learned your lesson. I've been too kind. Too lenient. Things will be different before spring. I have plans. I have great big plans for us all."

In a rush to leave the darkness and angst in the room, I spun on my heels just like the rest, only to be stopped before I reached the

exit.

"Patience?"

I paused and swallowed. "Yes, Kolev."

"Turn around," he commanded.

I did as he asked.

"I know you are fertile. Capable of conceiving and bringing life into this world, which is such a gift that so few have, but you would never do to me what Meredith did, would you?"

"I made an oath, Kolev. No, I would not." While devoid of all emotion, the words escaped me.

"I know I can trust you. You are not like the rest. That is all." He waved me away.

I grimaced after turning to leave again. On my way out, the two other Alpha slayers Kolev hired barged inside.

"Kolev, we have important news. We spotted three Alphas roaming the canyon. They were carrying a deer," one of them said.

When I stopped this time, it was of my accord, although I was already out the door. Out of sight, I lingered by the entrance and listened. Their voices kept going in and out, but I heard most of the conversation. The important parts, anyway.

Alpha sightings. By the sound of Kolev's voice, I could tell he was on edge. He avoided Alphas at all costs now. It was rare we ever came across them, which was why I was so surprised by my encounter the other day.

"Do you think there are more than three?" Kolev asked.

"We don't know. It could've been a coincidence. Maybe they were just traveling through," a slayer offered.

"If they are hunting close by, they are sleeping close by," Kolev stated.

There was a long pause and then some conversation ensued between Kolev and his aide that I barely heard.

"We'll go back out tomorrow to the same spot. What do you want us to do if we see them again?" a slayer asked.

"Kill them."

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Chapter Seven

Echo

Hunting was easy around these parts. So easy I might have stayed for a while, but I was only here on one mission. Plus, the weather was too unpredictable here. Even now, I watched as snow flurries drifted just outside the window of the caravan.

I couldn't sleep last night. With a restless mind and a body eager to do some more damage, I tied long leather strips around the tail-end of an arrow.

"Earth to Echo," Rafiq, my caravan mate, called out from the other side of the van. He threw a bouncy ball against the wall and caught it when it lurched back at him. He repeated the actions repeatedly while watching me doctor up my arrows.

"I thought we were buddies. Next time you go scouting, take me. Don't go off on your own," the young Rafiq said.

"I am responsible for you, boy. Your mother wouldn't like me very much anymore if I didn't bring you back in one piece," I said.

I'd been training Rafiq in archer since he presented as Alpha. For the better part of a year, he'd been going with me on my missions, learning diligently whatever I taught him. Even though Rafiq's training with me was complete, he still insisted on partnering with me whenever I left Mistacre, even on impromptu missions, like this one. I couldn't tell him no. Rafiq was now a full-fledged Alpha with a tree home he built in Mistacre on a lot he acquired through his trades. I couldn't tell him what to do or how to do it. Like every other Alpha here with me, they had chosen to be here.

"I'm not a child anymore, Echo. You're my mentor. You're a Primeblood. And our leader. And the greatest archer of all time. I know you know more than you let on. I want you to teach me everything."

"I don't know everything," I replied.

He threw the bouncy ball straight at me. I caught it with one hand and lugged it back in his palm. "You do," he said. "You just want everyone to think you don't. That way, they underestimate

you. But that's what you want, right?"

I grinned. "See? I teach you more than you think."

He chuckled.

A noisy situation outside interrupted us from our talks. Hairs stood on the back of my neck. I grabbed my machete, stood, and was out the door in three seconds flat.

When I saw Patience in the flesh, surrounding by nearly all of my men, I almost thought I was in a dream. I stood frozen for a moment, letting the seconds tick away, hoping that I would wake up. But then her gaze caught mine and somehow I knew she was afraid.

After that, it took me under a minute to realize why the Alphas were surrounding her. She was an omega. Alphas had many instincts, but only one stood out more than the need to breathe. If anyone so much as touched her, the deal would be done.

I leaned my machete on the steps of the caravan and barged through the crowd. The other Alphas parted for me, but they still loitered around like salivating dogs on a bitch in heat. Even I could smell her heat rising—an omega's heat.

I grabbed her and clutched her to my chest. "What are you doing here? Why did you come?"

"Go. You...all of you...you have to leave," she panted. She was sweating. It looked as if she was running. Still, she was the most desirable thing I had ever seen.

"How did you find us? Did you lead someone here?" I sniffed behind her, looking through the trees, half-expecting common men to burst out from the bushes.

"No." She shook her head. "No one saw me leave."

"Answer me. How did you find us?"

"It was easy," she muttered, and then looked down at the ground. Her heat rose again. The scent of berries and cream sent my dick to life. Suddenly, I knew how she got here. Her omega instincts had led her here. Just as I knew her scent, she knew mine.

"The other day, when you took me...I went to that same spot. It's windy, I can...smell you," she mumbled, shivering. Snuggled up in a thick wool coat, she was well-dressed for the chilly weather. Yet, she was shivering. It wasn't from the cold. She was scared...but she was here.

It wasn't unheard of for an omega to track an Alpha by scent, but it was rare. Most human omegas could not, but then again, most

human omegas were rare. She shouldn't have been able to track so easily either. Unless...

I frowned, backed her up into a tree, and inhaled her signature aura from the sweat glands near her temple. My lips were close to her skin, I could almost taste her. I didn't care that the other Alphas were there watching. In all honesty, if I wanted to, I could've tied her up in the tree and fucked her until she screamed to be released. I wanted to...

More than anything else, I wanted to.

I felt so weak, letting my cravings get the best of me. I felt so weak, allowing the others to see me in these trivial moments with the woman who caused my brother's death—*she was my weakness.*

Behind me, the other Alphas lurked. They did not know the hatred and love I had for her. They did not know the entire story.

My entire body covered hers like a layer of protection. I felt so compromised in judgment by her presence that I couldn't determine if I was blocking her so the other Alphas couldn't have at her or because I meant to intimidate her. If I were evil, I would fuck her until she was weak and then throw her to the wolves.

Her irises flickered with fear. "Please don't hurt me. I just wanted to warn you."

"You shouldn't have come," I rasped against her throat.

"Kolev is back," she said. "He means to kill all of you. He knows you are here. He has slayers. *Get away now.*"

"You put yourself in danger to tell me what I already know."

Her forehead creased in confusion.

"You regret coming now, don't you? Why do you think I am here already?" I demanded.

"You don't know Kolev. He is dangerous. You should leave," she said. "He just had a woman killed, and possibly a newborn. I don't even know why I'm here. If I didn't warn you, I would regret it if..." She diverted her gaze.

"If what?"

"If what happened to Czar happened to you."

I shrank back, unsure of how to handle the mixed emotions amplifying inside me.

"You should be ashamed to speak his name," I told her. "When I asked you to leave the other day, I never intended for you to come back."

A tear escaped the corner of her eye and she turned and

zigzagged through the maze of Alphas. They sniffed hungrily after her.

"Don't lay a hand on her. Let her go," I warned them.

"But she is going into heat," Tobin confirmed what every other Alpha already knew.

"I know," I replied, looking after her.

"She needs the knot. That's why she came this way. She didn't just come to warn us. She wants to be fucked. If you won't, Echo, I will," Aon stated.

"You won't, Aon. She is already mine. She is mine to break."

No other Alpha spoke after that. My verdict was final.

When I was sure she had left the vicinity, I grabbed my bow and arrow and followed her quietly back through the forest. She knew exactly where to go. She knew more than she led on. She had more survival instincts than she realized. But she was afraid. Someone had taught her to fear. Yet, fear had not stopped her from coming to me. I observed as she picked up several red pebbles along the way, stuffing them back in her pocket.

Just as I expected, she wasn't the only one out here. She had been followed.

The guy that emerged from behind a hill had two hefty swords strapped to his back. He tiptoed out and followed her.

She knew nothing about it. She was smart, but she was also naïve. And she was telling the truth. Kolev knew we were here. I was betting on it. And whoever he had tracking us had just spotted the omega on her return back to their campsite. There was no telling how much he knew or how much he had already seen. He had to die.

I drew an arrow from my quiver, aimed, and let the dart fly.

The slayer never knew what hit him. He hit the ground face down.

Unbeknownst to the threat to her life, the omega ran like the wind.

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Chapter Eight

Echo

That night, my men and I packed up and moved locations. We didn't move far. We weren't running—oh, no, we never ran—we just needed time to prepare for any pending attacks.

The next morning, the dead slayer's body was missing from the spot, so we knew the other slayers were nearby. I didn't know how many were onto us. There was no telling how many Alpha slayers Kolev had protecting him.

After advising the Alphas on what we would do next, I parted from the group after catching the scent of a strong male presence. The slayer smelled of something akin to shit. I watched for several minutes as he crept through the sludge, sloppily leaving his footprints behind. Even a fucking rat could've tracked this dumbass down. He was supposed to be hunting me, not the other way around.

I heard a low signal to my left and spotted Rafiq to the right of some bushes. He crept up until he was close and joined me near the bog.

"I told you to stay back with the others," I said.

"Why? You need someone to watch your back." He pointed at the slayer I was tracking and then about forty-five degrees to another slayer I had not seen.

"I'll be fine. Go back. Tell the others I'll send a signal once I need backup. Not sooner." I unstrapped my bag from my waist and gave it to him. "Take it back to the campsite."

"Nah. I'm not leaving you."

"Rafiq. You said you wanted to learn. Watch. Listen. Do as I say for once," I replied.

He rolled his eyes. "I know what this is. Tell me you're not going to do what I think you're going to do."

I caught his gaze. "You know me too well, Rafiq. So you must convince the others to wait for my distress call. I will be the decoy. Wait but protect our space at all cost."

Rafiq grunted. Without saying another word, he accepted my bag and didn’t stop me from going further into danger.

Once I was sure that my men were safe and out of the vicinity, I brought attention to myself. Both Alpha slayers were on me like roaches on a pile of fresh food.

The first slayer swung the handle of his machete and knocked me clear across the forest floor.

"This must be the savage who murdered Nedac. Gut him!" the second slayer hollered.

"Wait!" I held up my hands. "You misunderstand my intent. I have something I know your king would want."

The first slayer spat. "Speak."

"I am a prime. Tell Kolev that you've caught a Primeblood."

They exchanged glances.

"You lie!" The second slayer swung a thick bat at me. I caught it with one hand and then chucked it almost a dozen feet away.

"Next time you swing, make sure it's to knock me out," I warned.

His nose flared. "I'll kill him. Give me your knife."

"No! We'll take him to Kolev. He has the prime blood. You know Kolev will want that. Then we'll get our money and go."

"You said that last time. You said we would leave his ridiculous circus, but here we are now and Nedac is dead!" the second slayer contested.

"But who else will pay us as well as he for this prime Alpha? Who else will give us shelter and food without a long-term commitment? You can go, but I am taking this prime blood back to Kolev," the first slayer stated.

"Fine!"

I clapped my hands slowly. "Good choice. You two will reap a spectacular reward."

Neither looked amused. But by the end of this, neither of them would be looking anywhere anymore.

Just as I warned them, when they brought the handle of the machete across the back of my head this time, they knocked me out cold.

When I came to, I was in a cage. Chains that weren't my own were wrapped around my wrists, torso, and ankles.

The slayers had brought me right where I wanted to be.

"Hey!" The first slayer banged his knife against the bars. "You're up. Kolev will be back soon. Until then, you can stay in here like

the damn dog you are. There's no escaping this cage."

I glanced up at him. "What's keeping you here on Kolev's leash, slayer? He keeps promising you juicy steaks, but all he throws at you are bones he's already picked the meat off."

Angered by my insult, the slayer pulled at my chain, tightening them around my neck. He cut off my air supply until he thought I had passed out and then let go.

I leaned back against the cage, propping my forearms on my knees.

"How many alphas are with you?" he demanded.

"I'm alone."

"That's a lie. We saw three the other day. We'll get 'em all."

"Since you're so sure, maybe I'll tell you where you can find them."

"You're lying," he grunted.

"Don't you want to kill Alphas? Isn't that what you do, *alpha slayer*?"

"We'll find the rest of you savages ourselves. More alphas. More money."

I returned a thumbs-up sign and that angered him even more.

"When your pretend master gets here, wake me up, will ya?" I yawned.

Still weakened, I closed my eyes.

You will grow up to be weak. Who will take you seriously then? Aim and shoot, boy!" My father pointed at the target board once more.

Angry and bothered by his opinions of me, my fingers shook and sweat would not allow me to grip the strings as he instructed. The heat of the sun blared down on me.

Father grumbled and placed his hands on his hips. "We will be here all night long. You will not sleep, eat, drink, piss, or shit until you hit the target. Czar mastered this skill in under a week. Why can't you?"

I bit my inner lip, blinking back the wetness from my eyes.

"Ten years old and you can't master a thing. You must be a beta. This failure is rather telling," Father huffed. "Get to it! Again..."

Someone was cooking food. I could smell it from my cage. I peeled my eyes open to see that the alpha slayer was gone. In his place was some scrawny kid holding some fish on a stick over a flame. A taller male stood nearby talking to one other. The taller male had a knife

strapped to his belt and what looked like a bow and arrow that was far less superior to what I could manufacture. I grinned and re-adjusted my legs in the claustrophobic cage. My headache raged on...

"Father! Father come."

Before I could stop Czar, he dashed out of the house to alert my father about what had just transpired.

I looked down between my legs at my erection I couldn't control.

The younger nurse they sent to re-wrap my fractured leg and broken arm after she assisted me with a bath was just as surprised as I was to see my raging hard-on leaking cum and a knot forming at the base.

With my good arm, I reached over to grab a towel and almost slipped off the cot. The training nurse, who was only three years older than me, picked up the towel and handed it to me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were an Alpha. They told me you were a beta," she said, pretending to look away from my knot.

"It's okay. I didn't know either." Hiding my erection under a towel didn't take away the urge to seek immediate release.

My father burst into the bathroom with Czar. His eyes widened when he tore off the towel and saw my knot, presenting itself like a badge of honor. "Boy! You're an Alpha."

Czar looked back at the nurse and said, "Leave!"

She fled the bathroom without a word.

"Well, goddamn, I have two Alpha sons. Czar got his knot at thirteen, and now, here you are at fourteen showing your true self. Late as usual." He swiveled around and looked at the door. "Why did you send that omega away? Get her back in here. She's a nurse. She's here for this."

"Father, no. She was helping me!" I said.

"What do you mean, no? Would you rather be in pain? You know what you have to do. Don't act like you don't."

"Father, he can't have her," Czar said. "I caused her heat. And she caused his rut, but she is currently mine to fuck."

"I don't want to fuck her, anyway. I'll find someone else, father. Just let me heal first," I said.

My father rolled his eyes. "You break bones and present all in the same week. You are a klutz, boy."

Three days later after I showed signs of recovery from my fall, he brought an omega to help me with my situation without my agreement or

knowledge. Everyone in the house could tell I was on edge and ready to flip a switch. They knew my knot would present itself over and over again until I had an omega.

To keep my mind of the initial discomfort, I had gotten up during nights when everyone was asleep to practice archery. One after the other, I hit my target. I hit every last one, even with a painful knot throbbing along my shaft.

One night, I broke another bone dragging myself back up the steps trying to get back in bed before anyone could see me off bedrest. When Czar tried to assist me by picking me up as if I couldn't help my damn self, I refused his help, got aggravated by his laughing at my attempts to be the perfect archer, and yanked him down on the floor with me. We rolled around punching, wrestling, and choking each other until father pulled him up. Father said my aggressive-ness would have to stop before I killed someone and there was only one way to stop it. And so he brought the omega already in heat, slick melting down her legs. She was exceptionally willing, because what omega in Mistarce and Northgarde would not want to be taken by a Primeblood? I had lost my virginity prior to my injury—probably to a beta. Although the omega served her purpose by curing my aggression and satisfying my carnal cravings, I did not want her again after that first time.

After that, Father never called me boy again. He was still a disrespectful, narcissistic pig, but he also knew what I was capable of as an Alpha. We always had our differences, and although he tried to force me into being the type of hard-edged jerk he was—one that everyone feared—I tried my best never to be like him. He hated me for it. He favored my brother more. When Father lost his life in a dispute with the forces of another territory, I was happy to support my brother as the next leader of our settlements.

My Father couldn't help who he was. He was one of the original uncaged who scientists conducted tests on. He was a criminal in his past life. He had killed someone. Many someones. Other criminals to be exact. But that made no difference to the men who threw him in prison. Because of his connection to the marines, they placed him in the military prison and then later discovered that he had a suppressed Alpha gene. That was how all of this started really. Military prisoners with the gene were given experimental injections to modify them into something that was supposed to help the government. Instead they got more than they could handle. Out of the experiments came unpredictable, violent, and strong-willed modified Alphas who sought freedom and the intense need

to breed.

I woke up to a blinding light. It was morning. Every bone in my body ached, and I needed to stretch. That alpha slayer was right. This cage was only fit for a dog.

As I gathered my bearings, I knew that something wasn't right.

The tall guy from the night before walked up to a wagon and pulled off some thick wool blankets. There in the wagon were the severed heads of alpha slayer number one and alpha slayer number two.

The tall guy swiveled around, fixing his glare on me.

I waved.

"Send word for Kolev to come back. He needs to get back here with reinforcements now. Those Alphas are still out there," the guy instructed his men.

Chaos had ensued within Kolev's group, and he was nowhere to be found. I expected that from him—the coward.

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Chapter Nine

Patience

My insides twisted and swelled as I curled up on the bed. I pulled the covers over my head, but that only made it worse. I just wanted to disappear from my body until the wretched pain passed. The showers hadn't worked this time, and I had already taken three. I'd never had a heat phase this bad. This was beyond torture. Relieving myself only made it worse.

There was a knock at the door. The sound was so soft that I almost pushed it off as noises from the birds who foraged here often. The knocking was persistent and then came Celestia's voice.

"Patience! I know you're in there. Let me inside."

I groaned.

I couldn't let her see me like this. I couldn't let her come into my space. That she was also an omega made this even more difficult. There was nothing she could do for me, and I didn't want her suppressant drugs.

She knocked again, harder this time.

"Patience! I'm going to break my way in if you don't say something. Are you well?"

"I'm well," I called out. "Just go away."

"Let me in, Patience. It's important."

With pain striking my insides from every direction, I wrapped myself in a kimono I made and dragged myself to the door. I opened it a crack and peeked inside.

Celestia pushed gently on the door. Her eyes were erratic. She was frightened. "Let me in. A guard is coming," she whispered, adamantly.

I exhaled and reluctantly let her in. She slipped inside, turned around, and bolted all the locks.

Her eyes searched me up and down. "You feel it too."

I went to go sit on the bed, holding my hand up when she moved closer to me. "Just stay back, please."

She dug a folded-up napkin out of her pocket which she kept her

pills inside. "Here. Take it. It'll help. It'll make the pain go away."

"I can't. I won't. It'll make me unclean."

"Fuck being unclean! In case you haven't noticed, we're all fucking unclean. No one here has clean hands." She bit her lips. "I'm sick of it. I almost wish I could go now. I swear it, I'm leaving in the spring. I don't care what happens to me anymore. Hunted by Alphas has got to be much better than this. Crap!"

"We are marked, Celestia. All who see our mark will know who we're associated with," I said, referring to the travellers' mark on my back.

"I can get rid of the mark. It just requires a little pain. Well, a lot of pain."

Sick to my stomach at the thought of what she must do, I frowned.

"You know, burn it off," she added.

I cringed. "Oh, yes, that would work."

"But there's one thing I can never burn off. Wherever I go, if I'm not protected, an Alpha can find me." She walked back and forth in front of me.

"You can go to a gated sector. The gates are there to keep intruders out, Alphas too."

"No! I cannot. That would be signing myself up for the exact same fate. I am fertile. They'd give me to the first man that buys me."

"I don't think it works that way in all the sectors."

"Then why haven't you tried. Why haven't you escaped? You could've done so a long time ago. Didn't you just leave out the other morning? You shouldn't have come back."

"You've been watching me, Celestia," I said.

"I saw you. You disguised yourself in rags and left."

"I did."

"Where did you go?"

"I needed something. My knitting box. I left it behind the other day by the lake," I lied.

She frowned. "You seem to be able to find your way around the wilderness just fine. So, why haven't you left him?"

"It's not my time yet," I said, quietly.

"What do you mean? It's not your time?"

"It's just not. When it is, I'll know."

I got up and took a clean washcloth over to the sink and

drenched my face with cool water.

"It won't stop, you know. There's an Alpha here. They caught him last night. That's why I have to get away. If there's one, there's more."

In shock, I spun around. "What?"

"They caught an Alpha and brought him here. He's in a cage. I saw him. It's why I had to take the pills. This means there's more of them roaming out there and this is all I have left until that merchant comes back." She showed me her suppressant drugs again. "How can you stand it, Patience? How can you stand the pain?"

"I'm used to pain." I had told no one the story of how my mother disappeared when I was little and how my aunt sold me because she couldn't afford to feed me anymore. All the other wives believed I had willingly offered myself up at an auction. Only Kolev knew about my embarrassment. So, physical pain was nothing compared to the emotional pain of being abandoned.

"Oh, Patience." Her shoulders slumped. "Why did this dreadful condition have to pick us?"

As Celestia continued talking, practically revealing the identity of her dealer guy, all I could think about was the Alpha in the cage. Who could it be?

Deep down, I already knew the answer.

I was experiencing the most mind-numbing heat spell of my life. And it was because of him. Because of Evander, aka, Echo Primeblood.

"What do you think Kolev's going to do with that Alpha when he gets here? You know he went back to Southern Utopia to plead for reinforcements to protect us, don't you? He must've already known."

"Reinforcements...?" I swallowed, dread creeping up my spine.

"Yes, Patience. Guns. It means he's gone for guns."

"Guns..." My stomach wrenched and twisted in agony.

"Yes. It means he's actually afraid this time. I am too."

And so was I...

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Chapter Ten

Echo

Later in the day, the guards were nice enough to bring some kind of sandwich out to me to eat. When I didn't take it, he placed it on the ground carefully and backed up from the cage as if I were some ravenous animal about to wolf out or some shit like that. I might have been mixed with the DNA of a wolf, but it wasn't his head that I came to take. He reeked of fear as he tiptoed away, but at least he thought to offer me something to eat. I concluded that the alpha slayers wouldn't have been so gracious.

I didn't touch the sandwich. It wasn't because I wasn't hungry. It was because I was taught not to trust strangers. The longest I had gone without any substantial food had been for an entire week, but it wasn't by choice. My father's training tactics were brutal, and I wouldn't sit here and deny that his unbearable nature hadn't molded me into the Alpha I was today. Survival by any means necessary was in my blood.

I could remember as far back as eleven years old when my father blindfolded me and took me far away from our home and then left me in the wilderness. I wasn't given a compass, food, water, or a weapon. I was just left to fend for myself. If I made it back alive, I passed the training. If not, well, I was either lost, ran away, or dead. My father had nothing to lose by sending me on this training. Czar had already presented as Alpha and that was enough to ensure that a male Primeblood was around to inherit the land once father fell. Other fathers sent their sons on this wilderness training back then as well, so I wasn't the only one. The practice still existed today, but it didn't happen very often.

I made it back on foot in seven days, which was two days earlier than my brother's record. I left with nothing and came back with a sack on my back that weighed almost three times my weight. After that accomplishment and every accomplishment thereafter, I gained a bit more respect from my father. The most respect came a little too late when I presented as Alpha, which came as a surprise to

everyone. By that time, I had already resented my father too much to care for his acceptance. Even to this day, I never sought acceptance. I lead my people, owned vast lands, and had traveled far and wide, and the last thing I needed was a group of Alphas who tolerated everything and questioned nothing. I welcomed the challenge and it just so happened that acceptance from my men came along with it.

No more slayers presented themselves, so I concluded that those hired by Kolev were all dead—killed by me and my men.

After capturing me, both slayers must have been anxious about catching and killing more Alphas. I wasn't sure how they got paid—in coins or in recognition—but supposedly, bands of slayers made their living going around bringing back the heads of dead Alphas to whoever entrusted them with the killing. As far as I knew, I had never ended up on anyone's hit list.

My men must've gotten tired of them snooping around close to the second campsite. I had no control over them taking matters into their own hands, but I almost wished they had let me kill at least one more slayer. I would've taken great honor in doing it for every innocent Alpha who lost their lives by their hands.

Aside from the young boy who sat by my cage as his father instructed him, no one else dared to come near me. Even the boy's father, who appeared to be some kind of guard or something watched his son from a distance and never left him for more than a half-hour. They chained my cage to a tree. The overhanging moss was the only protection I had from the elements.

Someone notable passed my peripheral. I almost didn't recognize her in the heavy wool coat. When she glanced up to reveal green eyes that could enchant even the most suspicious man, I knew instantly that it was her.

As her minty aura drifted toward me, I grabbed the chains holding me hostage and squeezed. I shook my head, letting her know not to come. She hesitated, pausing about twenty feet from the cage. I regretted her putting her life in danger to be near me to keep warning me of what I already knew, but she rushed over, anyway.

"I thought I told you to stay away," I said, under my breath.

The boy looked over at us and blinked.

"It's okay, Peter," she said to him. "I'm just bringing the prisoner some balm from the nurse aide for his wound." She pulled out a

small jar.

The boy shrugged and began tracing in the dirt and sludge again.

She frowned. "You shouldn't be here in this cage. I warned you to go."

"I didn't have a choice, omega," I told her.

"Do you think I believe that? You want revenge, but it must not be your fate since you keep missing your intended target. He is gone again. He must've known you were out there."

I jerked against the chains. *"I will kill him."*

"Not in a cage, you won't."

"I won't be in the cage for long," I retorted. "I had to get the attention off the other Alphas."

"You haven't anymore. I saw the heads of those slayers. You're toying with Kolev. You're toying with these people. Don't hurt these innocent people. They've done nothing wrong. Most of them only seek shelter."

"I don't kill innocents. I need Kolev's confession. And I need information. Before I kill him."

"A confession? I doubt you need a trial. You already know he caused your brother's death. Yet, you keep blaming me. *I did nothing.*" Her hood slipped off her head as she became angrier and she quickly readjusted it and tightening the strings. More of her berry scent started driving me nuts. Locked up in a cage and horny was no place for an Alpha to be.

"Leave this cage before they see you," I said.

She opened the jar of cream, dipped her fingers inside, and reached out. When she touched my arm, I flinched, but not in pain. Something electric ignited the space between us. "They think I am the nurse. Your cuts will get infected if they're not treated. Kolev can't use an infected prime blood in his rituals, can he?”

I frowned. "Then you know what he plans to do with me? You've known about this all along."

She cast her eyes downward. "Ever since your brother..." She swallowed visibly. "There haven't been anymore rituals like that."

"Czar was infatuated with you. You made him weak. And after he fell for you thinking that you would give yourself to him, you never told him about what Kolev planned to do with him."

"Because I didn't know back then!" she shot back.

"You are a liar. After all this time, you still lie."

"I'm not lying. If you don't trust me, just forget it!"

Before she could stand up, I reached through the bars and took her wrist. *"I can never forget."*

"Why did you stop me that time from taking the poison and killing myself? I almost wished I had never met you. That day you commanded me to live was the day I held out hope. I thought you and your brother were good men. But after Kolev took me away, that was it. If I was to be your brother's omega and if you truly believed I intended to give myself to him and to stay with your people, you should at least honor that and hear my side. I waited for months. Years."

"I already have your side, remember? The poison that killed my brother was the poison you gave to your conniving Kolev."

She jerked back, gasping. "I never..." She shook his head. "You think I supplied the poison to Kolev to kill your brother?"

"You didn't want to be mated to him. If you did, you would've given yourself to him without waiting for Kolev's consent. He wasn't your father. Instead, you found the poison that killed him. Czar didn't die by fire. He was badly burned, but the poison ultimately killed him. He could barely breath. We found the same deadly poisonous weeds in a flask he used when we raked through the ashes left behind. I couldn't believe it. He was poisoned to death slowly."

Her lips trembled and parted.

"You see? That's why I'll never forget. Whoever you are, wherever you came from...I don't know. But I know that right now you're slick with heat. You cannot help to want to be fucked and knotted. Rest assured, omega, that when I am through with that man and if you are still here, I will give you the attention you crave so much, but not for the reason you think. Now that I have your scent, I will save you for last. You will scream and you will beg for forgiveness."

She jerked back and her lips stretched tautly. "Maybe I was wrong about you. You *are* the real monster."

"Take my advice. Run, omega. Get a head start, because when I catch you, I will give you no mercy."

She pushed off from the cage and tore off. My dick tightened. If I had not been caged, I would have enjoyed hunting her and toying with her before making her scream.

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Chapter Eleven

Patience

Sometime that night, Kolev must've gotten back. It was dark and late. Maybe at midnight. Whatever was going on outside in the courtyard caused the occupants of both rooms on either side of me to shuffle about. I heard doors opening and slamming shut down the hall.

The puttering sounds from the motor of Kolev's travel bus alerted me she was here. I was afraid for Echo. No matter how angry he was at me for the role he believed I had in his brother's death, I still worried about him.

I wasn't going to run. Whatever punishment Echo had for me, I would bear it. As I thought back on it now to the day I found the poison, everything became clear. I knew why Echo blamed me.

Peeling back the curtains, I looked out at the courtyard. Getting off the gutted-out travel bus behind Kolev were four men armed with rifles.

"Oh, my God."

Celestia was right. Kolev had gone to his aid in Utopia for reinforcements. And he had been granted with them.

I expected him to march right toward the outhouse where they were keeping Echo tied up near a tree. But instead, Kolev and his men talked loudly in the courtyard, causing alarm with everyone.

Suddenly he marched toward the hotel entry. Maybe he planned on locking himself in his sleeping quarters while the armed men gunned down all the Alphas. I couldn't allow that to happen. I wasn't sure what came over me, but I felt this urge to protect Echo. It felt like my life depended on it.

I raced to a hiding space in my room and dragged the dresser away from the wall. I had a lockbox filled with many keys. I had collected over a dozen keys I found lost here and there. I could possibly adjust or use one to jimmy the locks on that old cage. I could free the Alpha. I could redeem myself. I didn't want what happened to Czar to happen to his little brother.

As I started stuffing all the keys down into my coat, the door to my room flung open.

I gasped, coming to a full-standing position. "Kolev! I wasn't expecting you."

"Someone has betrayed me. Is it you?" Kolev came marching inside the room. "Was it Celestia? Someone has led the Alphas here. Omegas no doubt. I've always told you to stay inside when you are fertile. Why don't you listen?"

"I never led them here," I said, thinking of my next lie just in case.

Two guards came into the room. One brought a bundle of rope into the room.

"What are you doing?" I croaked.

"Tie her up to the bed. If she is actively in heat, she has to be the one who led them here. Either her or that slut Celestia did this. My gut instincts tell me one of you has strayed."

"Please, Kolev, no."

"It has to be done. One of them is already here. I can't risk the others coming."

I screamed as they tore off my coat. The keys I had stuffed in my pocket crashed to the floor. Kolev's eyes widened with recognition. The next time he looked up at me, his eyes flared with malice.

"It was you!"

I looked at the floor.

"I should have known." He took me by the throat and squeezed. "You would dare betray me after all I have given you." He shook me roughly and tore my dress from me in one pull. "You are in heat." He glanced at my naked body, not even trying to hide me from the eyes of the two guards. "Look at you! You are in full heat, aren't you, Patience?"

I sputtered and tried to gasp for breath, despite his fingers tightening against my larynx.

"Speak!" he demanded, letting my throat go only to yank me by the hair.

"It is true. I'm in heat."

"Did you allow an Alpha to touch you?" He jerked my hair hard.

I cut my eyes away from the face of a true monster. I had provoked him. What would he do now?

"It's written all over your face. You are unclean!"

"No—"

The sting of the back of his hand across my face took my breath away.

"Whore!"

He turned to his guards. "Tie her up until the whole lot of savages are gunned down."

After tearing his gaze away from me, he ordered the other men to find Celestia. "We need to be on the safe side. If one omega is in heat because of these Alphas, I'm willing to bet the other is as well."

Naked and angry on the bed, I yanked against my bounds.

And if being tied up wasn't bad enough, Kolev poured out a mix of herbs from a vial into his palm and then shoved it into my mouth. He held my lips closed, clamping my jaw down, and made me swallow.

"She'll stay put now, won't she?"

They all left, slamming the door behind them.

It was too late for me now. I faded away...

Tears brimmed my eyes as I plucked the azicory leaf weed from the ground. I couldn't remember how I stumbled across it to begin with but suddenly I was back here, wishing for some kind of sign that I had purpose.

I missed my family. Although, I couldn't even remember her face, I missed my mother. I missed my aunt even though she was the person who gave me to Kolev. She said she couldn't afford to feed all of us, but I knew that wasn't the only reason. She wanted me out of her home and never once stood up for me when her husband began groping me inappropriately.

I had done everything I could to keep my distance from him, but in a four-bedroom lodge with over a dozen occupants that was a feat in and of itself. After accusing me of doing something to warrant attention from her husband, she immediately saw an opportunity to get rid of me when known traffickers showed up into town. I cried that night when she told me to pack my bags and that I would be leaving with them. I knew what it meant and I had every intention of running away, just like my mother had. But then I caught Kolev's attention and he sought my aunt and offered her a price she couldn't refuse.

I had known about the travellers back then and I honestly figured becoming one of Kolev's cleaning maids was better than being handled by traffickers who would only sell me at auction to the highest bidding man.

Something snapped on the ground near me and I looked up to find a shirtless guy holding a dead turkey by his side. He had muscles for days and a large dark shadow enveloped me as he hovered next to me. He was striking, tanned, and long dark hair grew just past his shoulders. A strong minty fragrance swept under my nostrils and a calming feeling overcame me. Despite the change in the atmosphere, my body still tensed at the sight of him.

His gaze traveled to the weeds I held in my hand. I dropped the leaves on the ground, brushed them off my dress and stood.

I wasn't supposed to be here. I was told not to leave my room because of my condition. Having discovered I was an omega, Kolev told me I was forbidden from leaving the confines of our allotted space. If I stayed inside, no Alpha would ever know. But I felt like I was trapped in a cage and at the first sign, I bolted, only to feel this urge that I needed to stay right where I was. I felt conflicted and confused. But if Kolev found that I had strayed, I didn't know what would happen to me.

"Don't tell anyone I was here. Please," I whispered.

He frowned down at the weeds near my feet. "The plant is poisonous."

My heart jumped.

"Who will you kill?" he demanded.

I couldn't tell him I had picked the weeds for me to consumed, so I turned around.

"Stop!"

His deep baritone voice echoed. My body stilled and I felt compelled to obey. There was no doubt in my mind then that he was an Alpha. My reactions were more than physical. Something warm blossomed between my legs and my nipples beaded against my shirt.

He moved in, coming around to face me. His eyes roamed the entire length of me, and his nostrils flared. Narrowing his gaze, he tilted his head to one side.

"You are from that traveling group. You're here with Kolev, aren't you?" he asked.

I nodded. I prayed to the gods that he didn't rat me out.

"Why haven't I seen you before?"

I lifted my gaze, wondering if I had seen him before. We'd been here for what I felt was a short time and my duties only included mending old worn clothes and running soiled garments back and forth to the river to wash. "I—I don't know. Please, just don't tell anyone you saw me, okay? I'm not supposed to be out."

"You're one of Kolev's woman slaves, then? He keeps you hidden from us. I'm sure you know why, omega."

I gasped as heat rose up my spine.

"Once again...who will you poison?"

His voice was so commanding, yet so comforting.

I swallowed. I knew this was a bad idea. Why had I come here?

"Answer me!"

I flinched and shook my head. "I'm sorry. I can't."

He tossed the dead turkey down to the ground. I wondered if he had killed it with his bare hands. It was said that Alphas could kill anyone in a split second by hand. "You can. Who will you kill?"

"N-nobody," I stuttered.

"People don't just pick poisonous weeds from the ground for no reason at all. One more time, omega. Who do you want dead?"

I'd never harm a fly. Why did I want to harm myself?

"Me. The poison is for me."

He growled. "Don't come to this place again, omega. Do you hear me? I command you to leave. And I command you to live. Whatever it is you're going through, it's not worse than death."

His statement angered me. All my life, people tried to control me. Apparently, everyone thought my life wasn't my own. "You know nothing! You don't know a damn thing about me."

Before he could command me again, I spun around and ran off without looking back.

I wasn't looking where I was going because I ran smack-dab into another Alpha. This one looked almost exactly like the last one. They could've been twins. But this one was larger, taller.

"Running from someone?" the Alpha asked.

"Um...no. I have to go." I tried to sidestep him.

"No," he ordered and grabbed me by the wrist. "Who are you?"

"I'm Patience." I lowered my eyes from his. "I need to go back to the lake. I accidentally left my bags there." I had to say something in my defense now that I was in an area I shouldn't have been.

The Alpha's eyes searched my face. "You belong to Kolev, don't you? Are you a slave?"

I stayed quiet.

"You can speak. I'm an Alpha. Who is Kolev to you?"

"I am forbidden from speaking to you," I told him.

"This is my land. I am authority here." He studied my face. "You aren't marked by another man, no?"

I shook my head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You are different. You aren't like the others," he said. He sniffed at me.

Someone called out to the Alpha, ridding the air of the negative tension unfolding between us. "Czar! Over here. Take a look at this."

While he was distracted, I walked away quickly.

And if my luck wasn't bad enough, when I got back to the shelter, Kolev was waiting near the entrance of cabin.

"Patience. There you are. How is my new vest coming along?"

"It's coming together nicely. I should have it ready for you any time now."

"That's good. Are you feeling okay?" He pressed the back of his hand against my forehead. "You've been sweating."

"I'm fine."

"No need to run or rush. Why don't you go back inside and clean up? The Alphas have been generous but I don't want any of them running into you. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

His attention shifted to something on my sleeve. He plucked a stem of azicory weed with the leaf still attached and held it up between us. I almost died on the spot when he frowned down on me.

"Where did you get this?"

"I don't know. By the river maybe. I was sitting by the shore. Maybe it got stuck in my dress somehow."

He pressed his lips together and glared at me in suspicion. "No worries. Just be careful what you pick up. Most things are unclean here. Not all...but some. You're very important to me, Patience. I want you to know that." He tucked the azicory weed down into his front shirt pocket.

"Sure."

I walked away but I knew his eyes were on my back the whole time.

The day's happenings were eventful, but one encounter stood out.

My run-in with the blue-eyed Alpha who commanded me to live would never leave my memory. Even when I showered that night, it was his eyes that I saw staring back at me. It was the sound of his voice that I memorized. It was his scent that I recalled when I used my fingers to bring myself to pleasure.

The need to end it all faded. I had hope again that maybe there was something worth living for.

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Chapter Twelve

Echo

I knew something unsettling was wrong when the scent of another omega lingered near my cage. Lights from what looked like a two-story travel bus maneuvered through a parking lot crowded with tents and then parked itself across a narrow highway among old beat-up vehicles. Someone had arrived and something out of the ordinary was happening.

"Hey boy, what's going on?"

The boy who was now dragging toy cars through the dirt held up his hands and signed to me. It was the first and only sign he was mute and couldn't speak. Before, I only thought they forbade him from speaking to me. Now I knew why he'd been so quiet.

Our leader is back, he signed.

I wanted to ask him more, but he took off running and met a red-headed lady under the shadow of some trees. He brought back her scent when he returned to my cage. She was the other omega I smelled only a few moments ago. This one smelled of cinnamon and anxiety.

The boy thrust a folded-up piece of paper into the cage. When I glanced up to look for the redhead with the note in my hand, she was gone. I opened the note, but the words made no sense.

I tried to sound out the message. I grunted in frustration at my weakness.

"Please..." I handed the note to the boy. At first, he was confused. I didn't blame him. For what grown man could not read? As with most of the Alphas I grew up with, I had never learned to read fluently. They had trained me in everything else, but never to read. Strangely enough, I knew how to read sign language. We had several residents on Alpha's land who were mute or born with no speech.

I signed as best I could. *'I can't read words.'*

The boy looked back at his father and then began to sign.

'Help the omega. I could not. She knows you. Kolev knows about her

betrayal. He means to kill her. I fear for my life and hers. Sorry. Cannot stay.'

I growled so viciously even the boy shrank back.

"Boy, there's an innocent woman in trouble. This wasn't her fault. I have to go."

The boy looked scared.

"I've come for one. One man only. You know who that is. I have no intentions of hurting anyone else."

He hesitated, looked over his shoulders. He then made an *X* with his fingers, and then pointed to his father.

"Not your father," I said. "I won't hurt your father. I won't hurt you. I won't hurt anyone who doesn't deserve it."

He shook his head and pointed at the roof of the cage, which was rusted. Even the chain holding the cage to the trunk of the tree needed reinforcements. The boy was only showing how easy it was to escape the damned thing. And escape I did.

By the time I cracked open the latch, the boy's father caught on to me. He yelled for me to stop and came running over.

But I wasn’t going back even as they threatened to fire at my retreating back.

The other Alphas and I might not have been able to read fluently, but we knew how to communicate in ways others could not. Using a series of animal-type distress calls, I alerted my men about my intentions. I got a quick reply which not only alerted me they were there already and would back me up, but also how close in proximity to the place they were. They weren't far off. They must've been itching to do something.

I picked up an ax on my way over to the main living quarters and followed my senses. I knew the omega was nearby. Her scent was faint but still strong enough follow.

Most of Kolev's followers dashed out of my way when I came, but others were bold, especially the young adult boys. I had no intentions of killing them or making an enemy of them, so I just knocked them out with the handle of the ax or my fists.

Women screamed and took their children and babies inside as I traveled through the makeshift village. These folks were crafty, gutting out a hotel that held up better than many other structures that had not benefited from daily upkeep from the residents who lived within sector borders. It looked as if they planned to stay here a while. They could do what they wished, but it was the end of the

road for Kolev Zima. But first, priorities...

The omega's scent was strong. Her quarters were on the second level unit. I kicked at the door, but when it didn't budge, I took an ax to it.

She was naked, scared, and shivering on the bed.

When she saw me, her eyes brightened. *"Evander."*

"He did this to you?" I rasped, cutting the ropes with the sharpened end of the ax.

She nodded and placed her hand over her mouth. I lifted her hand and realized that her lips were swollen. Fighting back my rage because I wanted to keep her calm, I removed my fur overcoat and draped it over her shoulders.

The floorboards creaked.

"Evander!" She cried out and pointed behind me.

I threw my body in front of hers, just as someone fired a rifle. The gunman shot again and then ran out of bullets. I wasted no time. I flung the ax, and the blade lodged itself right between his eyes. He was dead from the blunt force just before he hit the floor.

I picked up the omega and carried her in my arm. On my way out, I reached down and yanked the ax from the guy's skull.

Without the help of the other Alphas coming to assist, I couldn't have held off the other gunman shooting. Something seared my side. I had no doubt that I had been hit with a bullet, but I had no time for extraction and care. I had to move on. I hadn't come this far to leave without having accomplished a thing.

Sadly, their determination to kill us caused some of them to lose their lives.

When the last gunman was dead, I gathered up some chain, went into Kolev's private quarters, and found the bastard crouched in a corner with a single handgun. Too bad he had already fired all the bullets.

"How dare you! How dare you come here? Savage—"

"Shut up, old man!" I knocked the handgun from his hand backhanded him across the floor. "You know exactly why I'm here."

He chuckled, spitting blood on the floor. "I'm not afraid to die, savage. The damage has been done."

I dragged him out in the middle of the courtyard for all to witness his end.

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Chapter Thirteen

Echo

As I stood in front of Kolev, my head throbbed maliciously reminding me that I was injured. Beside me, Rafiq asked if I was okay. I nodded.

“This coward has been captured, so I am now,” I said.

I stroked my side to check the depth of the bullet wound. Luckily, the slug hadn’t punctured my flesh at all, only the skin. I must’ve missed the bullet by shear luck of will. Yet, I’d still need to tend to it before it got infected.

Even while facing death, Kolev spoke lies.

"I think I know why you're here, Alpha. But things could've been different." His gaze ran across my face and recognition set in. “You’re brother…was it Czar?”

"You killed him,” I said. “He was a good Alpha.”

We had wrapped a chain around each of his arms with one Alpha on either end, pulling him, forcing him to remain on his knees. Past enemies had died this way. Pulled apart by Alpha's chain. It was death fitting for someone like Kolev. He would suffer as my brother had suffered.

Nedac twisted the chains tightly.

Kolev moaned from the pain and then spoke. "He volunteered himself. He volunteered his blood to to be used in my ritual. I sacrificed him to the gods to benefit greater numbers.”

“That is bullcrap. You worship the devil," I taunted him.

“If that’s what you think. But the devil isn’t my source of power. My rituals work because I am still here. No disease or sickness has ever riddled my body."

"Extracting his blood did not require killing him," I said.

"For this purpose, it did. Once the ritual had begun, his purpose was revealed to me. He had to die. He was part of a bigger plan of mine. This plan appeased the gods, and I happily provided. His blood gave me more life. He was one of many. He wasn't the first Alpha I sacrificed, and he wasn't the last."

"A sacrifice for what exactly?"

Kolev laughed. "Can't you tell? Don't you already know?"

I placed the ax at his throat. "If I did, old man, I would not be asking."

"I am like you."

I shook my head. "No."

"You can believe it or not. I am an Alpha."

“How so?”

“I lived before these times of sector division. My mother and father weren't modified in a lab like yours were. I was born this way. I'm a human Alpha. I presented, same as you. My gene wasn’t suppressed.”

“You have no knot. You have no dick. Alphas can’t be dick-less. You are just a bitch.” A few of my men burst out laughing behind me, but I saw no fun in Kolev’s lies.

“Don’t be a fool,” he retorted. “Human Alphas do not possess the knots of beasts. You are a mutation. An abomination. A savage.”

“Then, you are incorrect. You do not present, same as me,” I said.

“Maybe not. But you have to hear my story, then you’ll understand how much you need me.”

“Talk,” I commanded.

“When things used to be normal, I held a lot of power. I was a very rich man. My family had great reputation. Even though I was an Alpha, I was still a bastard. My father never claimed me, but my mother taught me blood magic and the rituals I needed in life to ensure that when my father fell, I would inherit his estate. And I did. I was a better fit than my lowlife drug addict brother, anyway. Long story short, I was a powerful Alpha in my community before they created such abominations as yourself. We had club and membership dues. We brought in omegas from all over the world, and we were never deprived. I was on top of things until someone who wanted my leadership role betrayed me. He wanted the presidency. He used his strength to overpower me, and he and his sons castrated me." He looked to the ground as if remembering the assault and then he continued, "I think it's a crime against nature, what you are. I think you should all be abolished and obliterated from the face of this Earth. So, that is my purpose, to purify the Alpha bloodline and ensure that our kind is never labeled as savages again because of the likes of your particular kind."

"You've been pitting sector leaders against us for years, so this comes as no surprise," I said.

"Then it should not come as a surprise that I am an Alpha—quite superior to you, might I add."

"No man without his manhood can be superior to me. You are on your knees and that is no mistake."

Kolev laughed. "*Gadjo*, I don't need a cock anymore to fulfill my agenda. I have already fulfilled it. Your kind is most hated among most sector leaders. It will only be a matter of time before they find out how inferior you really are to them. Just imagine how different it would be if all human Alphas were to suddenly retaliate against you and your kind."

"Most human Alphas never present because they are too weak. Their genes remain suppressed and their potential never fully realized."

"That's what you think."

"You couldn't grow a cock by poisoning and killing my brother. You still travel aimlessly with no purpose and no mission. You should've given up a long time ago."

"The sacrifice of your brother gave me life. On the night of his death, I had never felt so much power before. An Alpha's power. In sacrificing him, the gods revealed something to me. Something I never ever knew existed."

"What is that?"

He grinned. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

I ordered the chains be tightened around his wrists. His arms were already at an unnatural angle. It would take one tug to pop them from their sockets. I wanted him to feel pain with his last breath, just as my brother did when he was burned alive.

"As of tonight, I have secreted away the concoction that would identify every human on the face of this earth with an alpha gene, rather dormant or not," he said.

"And then what? You'd pit them against us too?"

"We all know that there are not enough resources on this planet for every Alpha, namely the omegas. Every reason for an Alpha's existence points to procreation and breeding with an omega. What would happen if suddenly all the omegas were off-limits to the likes of you?"

"It would never happen," I countered.

"With an Alpha sector, it could." He threw me a sly look.

"No such sector exists."

"Are you sure?" He looked smug.

"Speak!" I nudged him in the chest with the ax.

"I'm already a dead man. Why should I? And I have already sold the concoction to a scientist that knows exactly what to do with it."

"Too bad you won't be alive to witness what you expect to happen. I'm here to avenge my brother. You should've never messed with my clan in your quest for power."

"Are you, though? Or are you here for her?" His eyes drifted behind me where Patience stood with my men.

"You don't get to speak of her. I'm here to kill you, old man."

"I beg to differ. You know, your brother Czar wanted her so badly he would've died to have her, just like you would. Not only is she an omega, but she's also an *uncaged* omega."

"That is impossible. She is not an *uncaged*."

Kolev shook his head. "Look again. It's quite possible. I am no longer an Alpha and even I can smell the difference on her. She is not entirely of a human nature."

I swallowed and looked at Patience who's eyes were bright with realization.

"Patience's father was one of the original *uncaged* who refused to follow the majority when they broke from the prisons and the labs. As you know, many groups of modified Alphas split off that night—not just your group. Her father was a roamer and her mother was a scavenger. The mother left Patience as a baby with her sister and she never returned for her. The sister took Patience under her care, but she already had nine children of her own. She raised the baby anyway, hoping her sister would come back. Things must have been hard for them when I came into town, because she gave no hesitation when I offered to buy what I knew was an omega. The gods had already revealed her nature to me. I have visions, you see. They probably didn't know her status. She kept her heat phases to herself. She just wanted the girl out of her home since she was getting a lot of attention from her husband. Patience would've been sold to traffickers anyway, but I offered double the price. And why your brother thought he could gain her for such a cheap price is beyond me."

"But he paid with his life and you took her anyway," I stated.

"Maybe she wasn't for your brother at all. I made him believe so."

“You lied to him.”

“Patience was going to be a gift. The ultimate gift. She is perfect. Don’t you see. An uncaged omega with a human Alpha. That trumps everything. My visions tell me this.”

“Fuck your visions!”

He laughed. “One day, they will come to life.”

“You said Patience was gift. Who for?”

Kolev’s eyes darkened and he caught my gaze. “My son.”

Onlookers gasped and chatter rang out among the group. Even I was surprised at his admission.

“You are dickless, old man.”

“But I was born a man, just the same. There was once a time when I had a dick I couldn’t keep in my pants. It’s what got me in this mess in the first place. Dickless. Yet, I do have a son of my flesh and blood. And since you’re already thinking it, I’ll confirm that he is an Alpha. A human Alpha. And he’s worse than me.”

“You took Patience as a wife, did you not?”

“When my son didn’t accept the gift, of course, I did.”

“You could be lying like you’ve always done.”

“Why would I? If you think the reason I was running was because of you savages, you’re wrong. I’ve been running for years because my own son wants my head. I hope the gift I sent him will make him rethink who he decides are his friends and who he knows are his enemies. The concoction will be in his hands soon. If it’s not already. You’ve hunted the wrong Zima, Evander Primeblood. My visions predict that my unworthy son will rain terror on all of you savages. See? I’m the nice one compared to what he will do.”

“No one can predict the future.”

“And no one can change the past. Your brother was meant to die. You were always meant to have everything. I’ve seen it. In my visions. I am done now with this life. Unless, of course, you would spare me…and I could lead you to my son. I wouldn’t want anything. Just my life. That’s all. You’d never hear from me again. In exchange for—”

I cut him off, raising my ax and striking it down across his throat. He fell dead on the pavement with the head rolling a few feet over, mouth open while still in mid-speech. I threw the weapon on the ground and walked off.

"It is done."

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Chapter Fourteen

Patience

Shocked to my core by the brutal nature by which Kolev was executed, I stood there in the courtyard. There was silence in the night after the old man was dead.

Echo dropped the bloody ax on the ground. “It is done." His glare swept over the on-lookers. "Your so-called king is dead. I don’t want to make an enemy out of any of you. I don’t want to kill anymore of you. I don’t know who Kolev’s son is. I don’t even know that I care. If any of you ever see him, you can tell him that I did this. I killed his father. I am open to duel whenever and however he would like.”

One of Kolev’s aide’s stepped forward. “I know his son. It is true. His son is the sector leader of Automata. Far north of here. They hate each other. They still do. As for the concoction and Kolev’s confession, that has already been sent. No doubt, it is already in the hands of Kolev’s son. What he will do with this knowledge…well, I don't know that.”

"Only time will tell," Echo replied.

“You did what none of us could. He was becoming blind to weakness in his old age,” the aide called out after him. "It is true what they say. His son is just as selfish as he is. He will not care about the death of his father. As for the knowledge Kolev has sent him, none of us can predict how he will act."

"If he is an Alpha, he will act as an Alpha. My mission here is done." Echo walked off, leaving the aides talking amongst each other.

The Alphas separated from the rest of the travellers. One side went one way and other went the next. I wasn’t conflicted anymore. I knew exactly where I belonged. And when Echo came directly for me and hauled me off in his arms, my decision was solidified. I was an omega. I belonged with an Alpha. Not a flake.

When he carried me, I didn't fight him this time.

When we reached the caravan, he placed me inside and shut the

door. Taking a rag from the table, he pressed it at his side and glared at me.

“You were shot.”

“It’s not bad.” He tore off his vest and kicked off his boots until he stood there in nothing but form-fitting pants. The rock-hard imprint of his cock stood out. I started to lick my lips but then stopped myself. I bit my bottom lip instead and stole a glance at him.

I swallowed. "What will you do to me? What is my punishment?” I asked him.

“You know what it is.”

He plopped down in a chair, grunting as he landed.

"I do?" I asked, innocently.

He said nothing as he examined me from head to toe.

"I can help you, if you want," I whispered.

He grimaced. "With what? Poison?"

I felt bad, but I deserved all of his resentment. “I remember. I found the poison. I brought it to Mistacre on my clothes and Kolev must’ve known what it was and used it. I—”

He bolted upright from the chair. “Ssssh.” He approached me and placed a finger on my lips, silencing me. My lips parted and his thumb slipped between them. My tongue slipped out and tasted him. It was only a little taste, but I wanted more.

His hands trailed down between our bodies. He spread my legs apart and slid one finger between the folds of my sex. My clit pulsed against his touch. With a bit more roughness, he pulled the string holding my vest together and my breasts sprang free. He didn’t waste one moment as his mouth covered one of my nipples. He sucked and licked me gently while running his big, thick finger through my heat.

I moaned in ecstasy as his fingers played with my pussy, circling my clit and enticing my pending climax. Slick drained down my thighs and his wrist.

His teeth scraped across my nipple and then he sucked the bud into his mouth again. The moment his fingers slipped inside my soaking wet entrance, a swift orgasm overtook me. I cried out and rocked my hips up to meet his fingers, urging him to go deeper. Panting against him, I let my body soak in the aftermath of my orgasm.

He lifted his fingers to his mouth and tasted me. "Just as I

thought. Virgin. Untouched."

Not even a split second passed as he hauled me up and sat me on a bench near the wall. He knelt on the floor in front of me and his head descended between my thighs. He discovered my skirt was secured with buttons and he popped them loose. He tore my panties away from me swiftly. I gasped and clutched the seat. The first lick across my clit shocked me, but with each gentle lick, my legs began to fall open easily. I lifted my hips, offering him my throbbing sex. More and more slick spilled for him as he licked.

I began to unravel as my emotions and carnal sensations pulsed through me. My toes curled. My lips were pressed together to keep from crying out too much. My juices flowed freely and he lapped up every drop.

He plunged a finger in me. I screamed. He added a second, three maybe since it felt so full inside of my pussy. I came, fast and hard, while his lips were still fastened to my clit. He growled and lapped at my sex like a beast who hadn't eaten in days. His blue-grey eyes were fixed on me as he helped himself. I was so sensitive from the last climax that I came again.

When he was done feasting, he lifted his head up and rose to a standing position. His cock pressed angrily at his fly, protruding against it like a bar of steel.

"You taste like heaven, omega. Although, I knew this already," he growled, cupping his manhood and shifting it around.

I thought he would follow through, but he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and backed away.

"Why did you just do that?" I straightened my skirt and fixed my vest.

"Because you needed it, and I had to know."

"Know what?"

"What you sound like when you come. What you taste like on my tongue. You are one of a kind, omega. You are special and you don't even know your worth," he said.

I blushed.

"You are worth more than you know."

"I was sold and bought. So, how much do you think I am worth now?”

He frowned. "That's not what I was talking about. Your worth isn’t measured in coins or other monetary value. Did you know?"

“Know what?” I asked.

“About your nature?”

"I presented when I was thirteen. I was living with my aunt then. After that, things changed." I looked downward. "She didn't want me there anymore."

“Would you go back?”

“Never. I’ve been wanting to go off on my own now. I’ve been waiting for the right moment, the right time, you know. My aunt made it clear that I was a nuisance to her. I am on my own now.”

He lifted my chin upward. "Did you know that you were the daughter of an *uncaged* Alpha?”

I shook my head. "No. Only that I was an omega. I can count on one hand the number of times I saw my father. I was little, but he used to bring me presents...that's it. I can't remember his face though. Neither his nor my mother's. They are lost to me now."

"Your father was one of us," he said, slowly, as if just coming to terms with it.

"What does that really mean?"

"You aren't a human omega as I first thought. Your father was modified in a lab. You are his offspring, so you are of the blood. You never belonged to Kolev at all.”

"No. I was sold to him.”

"He hurt you."

"Sometimes. It was to keep me safe—"

"*No.* Hurting you doesn't keep you safe," he growled.

"Then I am not safe...?"

He cocked his head to one side.

"You want me to pay for what happened to your brother. If you mean to punish me for it, then I am not safe,” I said.

"He planned to do anything to obtain you. When an Alpha wants that badly, his enemies see that as a weakness. Kolev used that weakness against him, to trick him."

"I didn't know anything about Kolev's plan to sacrifice your brother. I woke up early that morning to the fire and then I was told to get up, that we had to run, that the Alphas were going to kill us if we didn't. We ran, but some died anyway. I was scared."

"I would not have killed you. You were to be my brother's omega."

I glanced up, searching his eyes. "Was I?"

He swallowed visibly and looked away.

"Your brother never looked at me the way you did, the way you

do. He only wanted me because I was the newest omega on the block. I'm willing to bet he had no intentions of keeping you."

"Stop talking," he said, softly.

"You refuse to be truthful with yourself. I'm uncaged too. You can't forget that. I know what it feels like to be drawn to someone and not understand why, and yet, know exactly the reason why."

"It is wrong."

"Your brother wasn't the one I wanted, Evander. It's why I never came to him. *I came to you.*"

He tore away from me, grabbed up his overcoat, and shoved into it. "You are free, omega. Your time is now. Your oppressor is dead. My men and I will gone by morning. The shelter is yours."

"Who hurt you? It wasn't me. Someone else hurt you."

He dropped keys and a folded up map on the table. "If you choose instead to go back to your traveling group, may I suggest keeping this map and staying far far away from Alphas, especially those like Kolev."

"And like you?"

"Especially me."

My chest filled with anger and I couldn't hold my disappointment inside. "Do as you always do, Evander. *Run.* When it seems as if someone has finally figured you out, you run."

"It is for the best." He took one last look at me and was gone.

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Chapter Fifteen

Echo

I sat on the tree stump and watched as the Alphas re-boarded the caravan. They were eager to get back to Mistacre. I knew it. They were eager to get home to their own beds. With their families. They were just itching to recap what happened on this trip. And they were excited to share all the treasures and odds and ends they found along the way. So was I…

Yet, something didn't feel right. I felt empty. Having accomplished what I thought was my mission, I felt no joy. My brother was still gone, yet I had done what he asked. I avenged his death. And on top of that, I found Patience.

I promised myself that I would let no other man tell me what the fates had in store for me. *Kolev and his visions could go to hell.*

There was no way he could've seen future visions of Patience and I. There was no way he could've foretold we would meet again. This man had manifested a lot of events, mostly pure evil, but I couldn't stomach the thought that he had somehow manifested a link between myself and my omega.

A mate-bond was never ever manifested by man or Alpha. It was all fate. Kolev had attempted to trump fate by pairing Patience with his nameless, faceless bastard son. This knowledge turned my stomach.

And he'd been wrong about Patience and his son. He even admitted it. But was he wrong about Patience and me?

Even in death, I would not allow a crook to dictate my future. My own father was wrong about my fate…and so was Kolev.

Father thought I would never be an Alpha. Father thought I would be a weak beta. He would never have predicted this life for me—a life as a leader and a life I made for myself.

I had a reputation of being unpredictable. I couldn't give Kolev the benefit of doubt by caving to his visions, so I rejected her. To that end, my intentions could not be predicted. No one should perceive my desires, so for the second time in my life, I rejected

Patience.

But why did I feel like the world was about to crumble around me and my life would fall apart at any moment? I had the same feeling when my brother gave up and took his last breath. I had the same feeling when I first learned that Patience left Mistacre.

Something wasn't right. I knew what it was.

Rejecting her was a mistake. My place was with her. It has always been with her.

"You coming? Or are you staying behind?" Rafiq paused near the stoop of the caravan. He gave me a knowing look. "Don't answer that. I can see it on your face. You're not getting back on this van, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

"You're not going to go AWOL on us, right? I know how you Primebloods are," he said, chuckling.

He was right, in a sense. Primebloods were scavengers at heart and never liked to remain in one place. I didn't know why that was. Even our first leader had gone AWOL. No one could confirm whether he was dead or alive. Everyone just assumed he was deceased. Still, we wore his symbol on our flesh. He was the first. He freed us and then paved the way for greatness. We would never forget him. Even if he decided his fate was not to remain with us, we respected that.

"I would never abandon my people. Or you, Rafiq. I have to go to her. She is my omega. I cannot leave her alone. I was lying to myself. Letting her go isn't what's best for her. I have to be my best self for her."

Rafiq nodded. "There's a snowstorm heading this way. Farther north, I think. You won't miss it if you don't leave now. "

"Don't worry about me, Rafiq. I'll find my way home. When you get back, tell the others I'll be bringing my omega."

"They'll never believe me. They'll never believe that you've finally chosen a mate. And she's *of the blood*, brother. She'll most definitely be welcome."

"Yes, it's time she came home."

I watched as Rafiq shut the door. The caravans rolled away, leaving me in an open field. I slung my bow over my shoulder and prodded through the thick brush, hoping to get back to Patience by nightfall.

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Chapter Sixteen

Patience

I waited for Echo to come back all night long, but when day finally broke, I figured he wouldn't return. I even walked outside the caravan to see tire marks where other caravans were once parked. I followed them all the way out to an unpaved road. I didn't need to view any map to know that the Alphas were back on the road, probably headed home.

If I wanted to, I could probably find them again, but I came to grips with the fact that I was alone and that solitary was maybe what I needed.

I had other options and they included sanctuary within other sectors, but I wouldn't be so quick to give myself up to the same type of imprisonment over again. I had checked, and Echo had left just about everything I needed on the caravan.

I had time to myself to think before making my next move and I decided that dragging myself back to the traveling group wouldn't be in my best interests. They were probably still there, trying to figure out the next move and who their next leader would be. I wouldn't rejoin them. I wasn't a traveller. I was an omega. The offspring of a scavenger mother and an uncaged Alpha, I was a free spirit at heart. In a way, I understood why Echo kept people at a distance. In this world, who could be trusted?

I had enough time to catch a fish and pluck a basket load of berries before heading back to the van. It would be night soon and I had enough survival skills to know that I didn't want to be alone out there at night. Tommorow, I'd start up the caravan and attempt to scout out safer territory with a terrain that wasn't so rugged. Come spring, I'd want to be able to grow as much food as I could.

I wasn't paying attention and my foot caught on a tree root. I flopped forward and if it wasn't for my quick thinking, I might have landed flat on my face.

Bushes rustled to the right of me and a shadow moved in my peripheral view. Something was wrong. Hairs stood on my neck.

Holding the basket tightly in my hands, I started walking backward and searching in the distance, trying to find the source of the noise. Whatever animal it was was getting closer. Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

I dropped the basket and took off running.

Something was behind me, chasing me.

I realized that directing it to my home was a bad idea, so I circled around and ran faster.

I ran until I couldn't hear the branches breaking behind me anymore. I ran until I found myself in the center of the canyon.

Spinning around, my attention darted left and right and suddenly I backed up until I hit something rock solid.

The scent of mint swirled around me and I knew in an instant who it was.

"Evander!"

I spun around.

"You outran me," he said, with a straight expression on his face.

I hit his chest. "How dare you? You scared the crap out of me. You said you were leaving."

"I couldn't. You know why." He grinned and then looked at the ground.

I smiled. "Were you watching me that whole time?"

He nodded.

"How long?"

"Long enough to know that you take too long to catch one fish."

"Well, considering that you scared the life out of me, I think you owe me dinner."

"How about a whole lifetime of dinners...since you, I came back for you."

I grinned. "Deal."

He swooped me up and then walked all the way to the caravan with me in his arms. Then he locked us inside.

"There's just one thing left for me to do."

"What is that, Alpha?"

“Strip.”

A command by any Alpha should not be taken lightly and I obeyed him because it was natural for me.

His gaze was filled with such longing and need. Consequently, his emotions mirrored my own. I never wanted anything as much as I wanted this Alpha.

He reached out, grasped me about the waist, and pulled me to his solid chest.

I stepped on my tiptoes, slid my arms around his neck, and pressed my lips to his. Our kiss was tender at first, but with each stroke of his tongue against mine, the rhythm intensified. He slipped his hand up between us and cupped my breasts, flicking gently at my nipple. His other hand slid up my back and pressed against my spine, tracing it down to the slopes of my bottom.

“You said you would break me.”

“I will,” he growled against my skin.

“How?” I trembled against him.

“I will spread your legs and give you my knot. Not just once, Patience. Over and over again. Until you’re screaming.”

Slick gushed between my legs, soaking my panties and thighs.

“Evander. I want you to know that it was always you. When I waited after Czar…” I shook my head. “I was waiting for you.”

“I knew you were always my omega,” he replied.

I gasped as he needed my cheeks with his big solid hands, bringing me closer to his body and against his thick footlong. His tongue slid into my mouth again and he kissed me passionately.

“You taste sweet,” he mumbled against my lips.

Our tongues mingling together tasted like more than just peaches—this tasted like heaven. His chest pressed against my stiffened nipples and my sex began to clench, preparing for something I've wanted since the moment I met Evander.

To show him just how much I wanted him, I tugged at his man-cloth until the strings were loose. When the cloth was gone, his turgid shaft sprang free. My fingers curled around him. When I looked down, I noticed that he was so large my fingers wouldn't meet.

He directed me down to my knees. Fueled by the need to taste him, I licked up the pre-cum from his tip. He tasted just like I remembered it, like a mixture of honey and sea salt. I took a second lick until his cockhead was literally pulsing.

“I’ve always wanted this. I’ve always wanted to taste an Alpha,” I moaned.

He growled. His skin felt like leather and iron. Prominent, detailed veins wrapped around his shaft and the engorged tip was filled with blood. He cupped my head, guiding my mouth all the way down his rigid shaft. I swallowed him whole, taking him all the

way to the back of my throat. His hips began to move back and forth. I gripped his thighs and slid my lips down his cock over and over again.

“I’m going to come now if you don’t stop,” he warned.

Unable to speak, I bobbed my head, more than ready to accept his seed in my mouth.

He grabbed a bunch of my hair in his fists and pulled me back and then looked down as I licked along the skin of his shaft. His groans were deep and raspy and when I looked up into his translucent blue eyes, I saw the carnal need racing through them.

I didn’t want to stop, so I keep my lips latched to his cock, alternating between long greedy licks to his shaft and taking his entire length down my throat. When his cockhead began to increase in size on my tongue, I knew it was over for him. He was no longer trying to hold anything back. His seed spilled onto my tongue, flooding my mouth like molten hot lava. I couldn’t swallow fast enough and some of the milky white substance leaked from my lips and onto my breasts.

I leaned back with my legs folded under me. Our gazes met, and I brought my fingers to my lips, licking them.

Evander hauled me to my feet and scooped me up. As he carried me to his bed, he rasped, "I have to knot you now."

His sheer size and strength caused the bed to dip. He laid me on my back and came down over me. When his hot mouth sucked my nipple, I cried out. Hungry licks to my breasts made me twist and squirm under him. His tongue felt so good suckling at my breasts. I raked my fingers through his long black hair and held him there. He moaned against my flesh.

“I want to feel you inside,” I pleaded, lifting my hips to meet his. His cock was still rock hard. Wet. Rock hard. And heavy with need.

He moved lower, sliding his torso down my center until his broad shoulders spread my legs wide. His hand dipped between my legs, petting the small triangle of hair that covered my pussy. One thick finger slipped down the wet seam of my sex, found my entrance, and pressed into me. His mouth replaced his hands, using his tongue to collect every last drizzle of slick from me.

His tongue danced across my clit, teasing it and sucking it. It felt like I was on top of the clouds as he worked me up to full peak. I pressed my hips upward and he raked his tongue through my dripping sex. He moaned and mumbled something in a foreign

language. The vibrations sent me to another dimension, a plane I never knew existed. My thighs began to quake and more juices spilled, coating his chin and my inner thighs.

"Evander!" I cried, as my climax took me, but he was relentless. Each flick of his tongue against my clit took me higher and higher. When I was spent, he came up over me. I didn't have the words to tell him how good that was, so I brought his lips to mine, tasting the sweet mix of Evander and me.

When he met my gaze again, they were different. He looked almost animal-like as his fiery eyes bore into the depths of my soul. His cock was heavy and wet against my navel.

I knew what came next. I hooked my fingers together behind Evander's neck and held on for dear life. He wrapped my legs around his body and pressed his pulsing cockhead at my entrance. He was hesitant and I wondered if he noticed as my pulse quickened with fear.

"I don't want to hurt you," he rasped quietly.

"You won't," I lied.

He buried his face against my neck and kissed me along the throat. I began to relax as his tip slipped into me.

"Patience," he moaned.

"Evander," I replied.

"Mate. *Mine.*"

"Yours."

He drove himself inside me in a single breath, thrusting until he was buried deep. I screamed as he broke past my maidenhead. A sharp bolt of pain spread through my loins and then began to fade.

My body fell pliant and I yielded to him. My innocence was shattered, but I was not broken. I cried out in pain but he didn't stop plundering me. My Alpha was more than worthy of this gift and the many gifts I planned to give him in the future. Soon, pain turned to pleasure and I was on a cloud of bliss.

He stroked in and out of me with firm, gentle strokes. When another climax began building inside me, he switched from gentle thrusts to long, deep plunges. My hips pumped upward in tune with my orgasm. He pulled me close to him, pressed his lips to mine, and we made spine-tingling, toe-curling love.

The scent of sex filled the cottage. Our moans and words of devotion sealed our fate.

The carnal whirlwind around us was more volatile than the sea.

The euphoria taking us high into clouds was more unyielding than the waves.

Suddenly, Evander's body stiffened and his cock thickened inside of me, and then came the knot, locking itself in my slick canal. With one final thrust, his seed flooded the walls of my sex, marking my insides—marking me as his.

He panted hard, sank into my embrace, but didn't let me go. I kept my arms wrapped around him while his cock remained locked inside my body.

"Are you alright, omega?" he finally whispered.

I swallowed, trying to catch my breath. "Yes."

I didn't know how much time passed, but he seemed to love the way I rubbed his back and ran my fingers through his hair.

"Patience?"

"Yes."

"Forgive me for not coming sooner. I was lost when you were lost me. I looked for you, Patience. I did. I feel regret over not finding you sooner."

"We found each other at the right time. And you are forgiven."

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Chapter Seventeen

Patience

The very next morning I woke up and Echo was gone. I wasn't sure why I almost panicked. He was Evander Primeblood and was known to roam wherever he pleased.

His bow and arrow was perched by the door and his overcoat was draped over a chair. He was around here somewhere. When I parted the curtains to peek outside, I was surprised to learn that it wasn't even morning. Glancing up at the position of the sun, I realized that it was well past noon. How long had a slept actually?

My body was sticky with sweat, slick, and cum from the night before, so I slid into the small shower stall in the back of the caravan and cleaned myself. Under the lukewarm stream, I couldn't keep my hands from myself. Every touch to my clit reminded me of how exquisite our session last night was. I wanted more. I wanted Echo to take me again.

By the time I exited the shower, slick was already melting down my legs. My pussy throbbed uncontrollable and my insides began to ache. I wrapped myself in a towel and peeked out the window again. There was no sign of Echo, but it was imperative that I did something to reduce the ache between my legs.

I took Echo's overcoat and other belongings and crafted a small nest in the center of the small twin bed we had sex on last night. I hadn't even completed the nest yet, when I heard the sound of heavy boots scratching across the pavement and then trodding up the steps.

The door swung open and echo stood there holding a bundle of fish on the line. He was bare from the waist up. His chest glistened with sweat and his hair was loose on his shoulders.

I gasped and my pussy clench on absolutely nothing.

"Evander." I clasped the towel around my bare torso. My eyes darted over to the fishing rod that was propped up next to his bow and arrows. "How did you…?"

"With my hands," he stated, kicking off his boots. He threw the

fish in the sink, washed, and dried his hands.

All the while, I stayed in the nest. I felt comfortable there and when Echo joined me, I felt protected.

"Did you make this for us?" he asked in a low growl.

I swallowed and nodded.

He unlatched his belt and shoved his pants down from his waist. His massive dick sprung free and he was already hard as a rock.

Presenting on my knees, I pushed the towel aside, revealing myself to him.

"Why did you shower?" He asked.

"I was unclean."

"From now on, *unclean* is not a part of your vocabulary. Do you understand?"

"Yes. You will only shower when I allow you to." My nipples beaded and my clit pulsed at his command.

He leaned in and gently lifted my chin. "I want you as you are. When you are in heat like this, you are forbidden from washing away my scent unless I am here to mask you again, understand?"

I nodded. "Yes, Alpha." Slick pooled between my legs.

He kissed me hungrily, taking my lips with passion. I kissed him back, lifting myself up to connect with his body. Slick drained down my legs, leaking on the bed within our nest.

He reached down between us and parted my wet lips and then slid a finger up into me. "Fuck!"

My pussy clenched hard around him, but it wasn't enough. "Please," I begged.

Holding my stare, he began to finger-fuck me. He used his free hand and wrapped his fingers around my throat, cutting off my moans.

"Turn," he said, releasing his grip.

Shivering and weak in the knees, I turned to face the wall.

"Present." Instantaneously with his command, I bent down, placing my face in the plushness of his overcoat and raising my ass high in the air.

He squeezed my ass with his big hands and I squealed. Peaking around, I watched as he sunk to his knees and pushed my thighs wide apart.

The moment his tongue hit my pussy, I let go. I came, faster than I'd ever come before. He feasted on me like a ravenous beast. The sounds coming from his mouth as he kissed, sucked, and licked

to his hearts content aroused me like never before. His big hands and long, thick fingers held my ass cheeks and pussy splayed to his liking as he plunged his tongue in and out of both entrances, taking turns with both and then teasing my clit.

I came again, screaming into the air.

“So good. You taste of berries, Patience. Your slick is like honey. Sweet and delicious,” he groaned.

“Please, Alpha. I give myself completely.”

“Yes, omega, you will.”

Placing his dick against my sopping wet pussy, he drove to the hilt, burying himself against my cervix. Raw pleasure ripped through me as an orgasm took me by surprise.

He drove hard and fast into me and I grabbed at the blankets, gripping them, holding on for dear life.

“Gods. More, Evander! Please don’t stop.”

“I love the way you say my name,” he growled, leaning down and planting his lips against my neck.

I arched my back and purred out into the thin air. I felt his teeth at my neck. When I felt the sharpness of his canines, I knew then without a doubt that he was a prime—an Alpha in his own right. Not entirely human. Not entirely beast. But he was mine, just the same.

“Bite me,” I urged.

His teeth sunk into me, the same as his dick. I reveled in the feel of the mate-bond forming between us, pushing us to new heights.

His knot swelled inside of me. He slammed into me once more and reached his peak. Hot cum exploded into me. There was so much of it, streams of it drained out of me and into our nest.

We clung to each other like that. He spooned me while still knotted inside me and even after the knot subsided.

“I choose you, omega. I always choose you.”

“It’s okay to want something for yourself, Evander. No one will fault you for it.” I felt that needed to be said and when he tightened his grip around me and buried his face against the back of my neck, I knew he understood that it was okay to trust again. I would never belittle or betray him.

“Come back with me. To Mistacre.”

“I would be honored to join the uncaged. It’s my fate. I was always meant to be there with you.”

“I’ll build us another cabin. A bigger one. You could have a

store. For your dresses. You would be safe. I would make it my priority to make you happy every single day."

"I've never been happier. But you know what would make me even more happier?"

"What's that?" He turned around, his eyes widened, waiting for my reply.

"I want to be a good mother. I know your heart, Echo. I know you'll be a good father. I've never had a real family. I want a family with you."

He grinned widely, and I had never seen him beam like that before. "Shouldn't be too long now, for we have already started."

After we kissed and rutted again, we drifted off to sleep.

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